UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Consumer Stewards of Brand Communities

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under the supervision of Prof. Helene de Burgh-Woodman (as Principal Supervisor), A/Prof. Sarah Miller (as co-supervisor), and Dr. Keri Spooner (as external advisor and mentor)

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, *Yanhan, WANG*, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of *Doctor of Philosophy*, in the *Business School* at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Abstract

This study examines the social structures of online communities. It focuses on specific figures who emerges out of these communities – a figure this study termed *consumer stewards*. This research defines consumer stewards as highly visible community members who enjoy high social capital and use this capital to exercise power to obtain marketing attention and enhance co-creative opportunities between audiences and commercial interests. Using the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's hierarchies of capital, the eSports community is the context in which the study investigates how these consumer stewards emerge, build their capital and preserve their status within their given community. While this study focuses on the eSports *StarCraft II* community, it endeavours to make a broader theoretical contribution to the consumer culture theory literature, which has repeatedly sought to understand online consumer communities and their internal structures. A documentary film study and a netnographic research method were chosen to examine the eSports community. The documentary was filmed in 2014 and centred around eSports celebrities (i.e. consumer stewards), and netnographic data was gathered from the eSports community between 2011 to 2020. Three findings are presented in this thesis. First, it provides a detailed breakdown of the composition and function of consumer stewards. Second, it defines *engagement* as the medium for exchanging capital and power. Furthermore, it makes the argument that engagement could be counted as the fourth capital, supplementing the three forms of capital identified by Bourdieu (1984). Third, it highlights the delicate social position consumer stewards occupy between brand owners and ordinary consumers and discusses both the practical and theoretical implications such a relationship has in the field of marketing and online relationship/narrative management.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

According to an industry statistic published in 2016, social media stars have become more influential in celebrity marketing (Marketing Charts, 2016). Traditional celebrities continue to be a dominating marketing force; the survey showed that 69% of company marketers and 74% of agencies employed celebrities (film actors). However, when inquired about their choice of upcoming endorsement work, company marketers stated that 43% of the social media stars were relevant to their marketing strategy, which put social stars close behind film actors' 50%. Meanwhile, agencies' responses were even more dramatic, as they favoured social media stars (46%) over film actors (39%; Marketing Charts, 2016). It seems that in recent years, the industry has started to recognise social media stars as effective promotional tools. However, what is the cause of this? And who are social media stars?

The reason for the rise of social media stars is twofold. First is the increased use of social media. According to the July 2022 report from a social media statistical research, '59% of the world's population use social media. The average daily usage is 2 hours and 29 minutes' (Chaffey, 2022). Second is the result of such intense use of social media, which caused the rise of online communities, in particular, online consumer communities. An online consumer community can be defined as a 'cyberspace built by groups of people who utilize networked computers to form and sustain a community through ongoing communication' (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002, p. 2), and it is 'one of the most effective ways for brands, consumers, employees, and individuals within specific industries to engage with each other' (Casey, 2022).

The rise of online consumer communities means marketers must also move online to reach their intended audience. A 2022 statistic on digital advertising spending valued global digital advertising marketing at $602.25 billion, which is approximately 66.4% of all spending on media ads, and it is forecasted that in 2023, this spending will increase by another 13.1% (OBERLO, 2022). However, online consumer communities often have their unique consumption behaviours and beliefs, especially when members are passionate about a particular brand (Canniford, 2011; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008), which makes the relationship between the virtual marketers and communities often fraught with conflict (Baker & Curasi, 2008; Cova & Salle, 2008).

This introduces the notion of social media stars. Within these online consumer communities, critical figures have emerged who have taken on titles such as celebrity endorsers, online influencers, Instagram models and YouTubers. These individuals have attracted attention from consumer culture and marketing researchers for their impact on the online marketing terrain and the mediating role they play between commercial and community engagements (Kang, 2021;

Liudmila, 2020; Lu et al., 2021; Saputra & Setyawan, 2021). Common among all these figures is their high visibility within the communities to which they belong. These new celebrities have been created as a result of the introduction of online communication technology and often their product consumption, for example, TwitchTV Streamer (LaserBelch, 2019; Zepla, 2022b).

This research identifies these figures within the virtual community environment as consumer stewards and defines consumer stewards as '*highly visible members of the player community who enjoy high social capital and use this capital to obtain marketing attention and enhance co-creative opportunities between audiences, players and commercial interests*' (Wang et al., 2022, p. 252). The role of consumer stewards constitutes a simultaneously mediating and gatekeeping function within online communities, thereby occupying a seemingly paradoxical position on the marketing and online community landscape. This figure, the consumer steward, signifies a new influence in the online virtual community territory and represents an essential lever for marketers seeking to build co-creation and engagement opportunities with consumer communities. To investigate the role of consumer stewards, this research focuses on the eSports community as its context. Within this environment of emerging virtual communities and the increasing value they embody, eSports has attracted much scholarly attention for its complex social, economic and commercial composition. According to Seo (2013), those modern consumers can be seen more as a 'constellation of marketing actors participating in the co-creation of value, and these actors originate from both the companies and consumers' (p. 1543) rather than from a traditional market/consumer dynamic. This is particularly so within the Asian eSports context, where the commercial value of this community and region is core to the sport's global growth. These figures are significant for their potential ability to ameliorate some of the conflicts between marketing and community actors. To date, these figures have received comparatively little attention in the literature because they have been eclipsed by more prominent constructs, such as influencers and celebrity endorsers. However, their role in maintaining community and commercial linkages is key to online communities.

Given the constellation-like nature of the eSports community and the particular consumer–commercial terrain to which it gives rise, consumer stewards play an essential role in mediating the relationships between actors. However, to do so, they must tread a delicate path between preserving their legitimacy within the community (often requiring them to censor or critique the very marketing efforts they are enlisted to endorse) and enabling the co-creative synergies between commercial and community actors to flourish (thus risking criticism or rejection by the player community). In exploring the complex and often tense role of consumer stewards, this thesis presents some important theoretical insights into the composition of the eSports

community as reflective of virtual community configurations more broadly and discusses implications for marketers seeking to leverage these key figures to enhance their brand and reputation within the eSports universe.

1.1. Consumer Stewards

Consumer stewards are influencers, but there is a crucial difference between the two terminologies. An *influencer* refers to an individual in a position of power and their effect within a given discipline, for example, marketing (Guoquan et al., 2021). The problem is that the emphasis here is often on what an influencer can do rather than what made an influencer in the first place. This creates an illusion that influencers are impossible to create, touch or get close to, for they belong to another social class altogether. Celebrities, politicians and monarchies – these people are influencers. They may have had humble beginnings, but they are no longer part of the general public's social position or perceptions (Bourdieu, 1984). One does not expect King Charles III to walk down the street like an ordinary elderly man. On the other hand, consumer stewards are influencers, but no matter how influential they are, they are still consumers. Simply put, a consumer can relate to other consumers, while an elderly man cannot relate to King Charles, no matter how beloved the latter is to the former. Hence, consumer stewards are a unique breed among influencers. Celebrities and other influencers are generally above or separate from the community. In contrast, consumer stewards are part of their communities, which makes them, by default, relatable and authentic, and consumers trust them more because of it (Nouri, 2018, pp. 16-17).

The journey of everyday consumers evolving into consumer stewards and achieving success is a captivating area of research. The relatability of their struggles draws people in, and there is a strong inclination to support the underdog. Online interactions surrounding these stewards are passionate and engaging, with fans displaying intense devotion and admiration. However, the question that often goes unsaid is, "What is their secret?" This curiosity drives this particular thesis to explore these exceptional yet relatable individuals, seeking insights that can inspire others on their own paths to success.

1.2. Focus and Aim of This Study

This study focuses specifically on the online eSports community as the field from which consumer stewards emerge. The eSports community was chosen because electronic gaming has been one of the driving forces behind the advancement of digital technology (Parsons, 2016), and consumer stewards are a by-product of this advancement. The advancement of media/information technology enables a particular equalisation of access. Consumer stewards

rely on technologies to build their status, communicate with their followers and co-create commercial opportunities. Through their co-creative activities, consumer stewards represent their communities, thus empowering communities to use the product beyond mere consumption, for example, to trade, sell, duplicate and recreate. This inevitably creates additional market value the original seller did not plan on. It must be emphasised that consumers who create additional value are still consumers in every sense of the word, yet they now also perform several additional roles. For this reason, scholars such as McCracken (1988) argued that the word 'consumer' is no longer sufficient because it assumes that the consumer cannot create value; therefore, it is a term that does not fully describe the additional roles performed by the consumer.

In order to understand the influential role consumer stewards play, the power they wield and the field in which they operate, this research uses Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) social theory. Bourdieu's theory of class, power relations and the development of specific behaviours (habitus) within a community is instructive for understanding how consumer stewards emerge, how they develop and maintain different forms of capital and what influence they hold over their communities. Consumer stewards are particularly effective at constructing an identity narrative (McCreery & Best, 2004) that continuously constructs and reconstructs the reality around them (Watson, 2009). This means that the key to understanding consumer stewards' social identities is to analyse the narratives these individuals present to the world through their daily actions. This study argues that consumer stewards are, at once, *consumers, producers, leaders and marketers.* The unique aspect of this multilayered social identity entails the accumulation and exchange of significant power and capital to act as a producer, leader or marketer while still being a consumer.

1.3. What Are Consumer Stewards?

Consumer stewards are a phenomenon that can emerge from any collective identity, such as a brand community (Goellner et al., 2017). This thesis defines consumer stewards as:

'*Highly visible members of the player community who enjoy high social capital and use this capital to obtain marketing attention and enhance co-creative opportunities between audiences, players and commercial interests.*'(Wang et al., 2022, p. 252)

Consumer stewards are important to any community in supporting its growth and expanding its commercial interests, especially if communities and commercial interests exist mainly in the digital space – such as eSports. This is because a growing community requires a tremendous amount of activity or content to stimulate social content (Bapna et al., 2019, p. 425), which must be reliable and appropriate. As a result, a great deal of consumer-created content is required (Cova & Salle, 2008) to maintain online communities.

According to Wang et al. (2022):

> ‘Consumer stewards possess four distinct qualities that distinguish them from other figures who emerge from online communities. These attributes are required to establish credibility, legitimacy and status within the community, ultimately leading to that figure being accepted as an authentic leader. In the context of online communities, authenticity is discerned through a demonstrated commitment to lived values, expert knowledge and a grassroots connection that also enables co-creative activities for the community’. (p. 252)

The first attribute is the status and identity of consumer stewards as *consumers,* where they are authentic consumers of the products, services and activities in line with other community members. This quality is significant because it lends credibility to the individual as being *of* their community. Consumer stewards must be seen as part of the community to obtain trust (Nouri, 2018).

The second attribute of consumer stewards is their capacity as *producers*. The difference between traditional and modern consumers is their ability to take an active role in value creation (Seo, 2013). The role of producer includes content creator/user-generated content manager and co-creator. User-generated content or that of a content creator can be defined as ‘information produced by members of the general public (the crowd), who are often unpaid and not affiliated with the organization’ (Lukyanenko et al., 2019, p. 624), whereas the co-creation process requires consumers to have more affiliation with brand owners and practice cooperation. This is where the consumer and brand owner work together by pooling their resources (for example, expert and information power) to benefit both parties (Omar et al., 2020, p. 167).

The third attribute of consumer stewards is their ability to play the role of *marketer*. They have an interesting relationship with brands and brand owners to promote certain brands to the brand communities. The reason this relationship is interesting is that consumer stewards must navigate a certain tension between preserving their authentic status within the community and acting as a conduit for new products or services that develop or support their community’s activities.

Consumer stewards are, therefore, *leaders* – hence the use of the term steward to signify this fourth attribute. These stewards utilise the online environment to build their leadership presence and mediate the community–marketing relationship in a given environment. In order to achieve leadership status, consumer stewards must refine their skills of engagement, demonstrate their credibility as experts and engage their community through authentic communication. Jenkins et

al. (2013) asserted that consumer behaviour in the online environment is shifting from an appointment-based model to an engagement-based one. The behaviour of consumer stewards mirrors this assertion beautifully. An engagement-based model assumes that audiences are 'active agents' (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 116) who can generate additional market value beyond mere consumption. The term active agents is extremely important, inferring that consumers seize the opportunity in the online world to engage with and take control of the products and services they consume. Through this engagement, one can see that the nature of the consumer changes from passive to assertive, from consumer to co-creator (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012; Habibi et al., 2014; Laroche et al., 2012). Consumer stewards act as the conduit between products/services and consumer communities, directing communication and 'spreading' (to borrow Jenkins' (2004b, p. 34) term) media messaging. On the one hand, consumer communities enjoy a certain degree of equality (Akar & Dalgic, 2018, p. 473); on the other hand, consumer stewards are essential to the dissemination of crucial information and insight.

While consumer stewards possess the four key attributes of consumer, producer, marketer and leader, we must also acknowledge the specific context or environment in which consumer stewards operate and attain their status. The work of Bourdieu (1984) provides a valuable framework for our understanding of social structure, and his work is used throughout this research as the theoretical framework for interpreting the role and function of consumer stewards. Bourdieu developed the critical concepts of field, capital and habitus to explain the hierarchy within social networks. Capital accumulation within a given field is key to consumer stewards' success, authenticity and longevity within their communities. By obtaining economic, cultural or social capital (Bourdieu, 2011), an individual may move to a higher level of social class (Trigg, 2004, pp. 404-405).

While anyone has the potential to become a consumer steward through capital accumulation, those who become consumer stewards must possess a certain level of engagement. This is because moving beyond society's default role of a consumer requires consumer stewards to actively perform duties that are not required of an average consumer. For example, in the leadership role, only certain consumers have the qualities of leadership and enough social capital to act for the greater good of the community (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012; Sigamoney, 2016). Likewise, the marketer and producer roles require one's willingness to learn the use of a particular technology to be 'technologically literate' (Jenkins, 2004a, p. 35) in order to get ahead of the rest of the population, for example, possess a skill or knowledge others do not.

To become a consumer steward is to create a leader-and-follower relationship, which suggests a complex social interaction and social structure within consumer groups. They each demonstrate class, power struggle and inequality (Bourdieu, 1984). New interrelationships are created through a consumer steward's engagement with the digital realm between economic resources, internalised aptitudes and social positioning (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017, p. 962). The result of constructing this new interrelationship is to increase the volume and change the composition of various forms of capital (social, cultural and economic), which then leads to a change in one's social trajectory (Bourdieu, 1984).

This change in social trajectory has the crucial effect of elevating one's capital and power. Leadership is a position of power. Depending on what forms of capital are exchanged for this power, the forms of power will differ (Bourdieu, 1984; French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965). For example, PewDiePie, a popular YouTuber, possesses a high level of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984), which can be exchanged for referent power (French & Raven, 1959). This referent power can be translated into a 'halo effect', where consumer stewards are lauded without question (Kahneman, 2013). So, if PewDiePie promotes a product, his followers are persuaded to like the product by default because they automatically favour things associated with him. This influence on purchase intent is why marketers are willing to pay a significant endorsement fee (Singh & Banerjee, 2019).

1.4. Research Purpose, Scope, Contributions and Questions

The purpose of this research is to identify, interpret and explain consumer stewards as distinct online figures who should be distinguished from other online influencers. This study is important for its careful nuancing of these figures as symbolic of the kinds of complexities that emerge from consumer communities, the stakeholders who compose the field and the commercial interest that frames their context. Unlike influencers, according to Wang et al. (2022), consumer stewards are embedded within the community and carried with them a sense authenticity. They are more likely to be treated as '*one of the gang* – but they are also conduits, power brokers and mediators between actors. In this respect, they embody a range of power, status and ethical entanglements that remain largely hidden in research on online communities. Nevertheless, as our world increasingly plays out online and more relationships are formed in the virtual environment, a more sensitive account of how community relationships form, develop and endure through the agency of key leaders and proponents is required' (p. 248). This research aims to increase our understanding of this important emerging social, political and commercial virtual universe.

This study uses the eSports community as its context. Specifically, it focuses on the *StarCraft II* brand community located on the YouTube social platform. The justification for this focus is fully explained in the literature review and method chapters. However, as a brief introductory explanation, eSports, *StarCraft II* eSports, YouTube and the community that occupies all three domains present significant economic, social and academic value. For example, according to the latest statistics on eSports market revenue worldwide, its revenue in 2012 was USD $130 million; in 2016, this had risen to USD $493 million, and in 2017, it reached USD $655 million (Statista.com, 2018). Furthermore, in April 2022, the revenue already reached a staggering USD $1,384 million, and the projected revenue for 2025 is a massive USD $1,856.2 million (Statista.com, 2022). In April 2017, the Olympic Council of Asia announced that eSports (*StarCraft II*) would become a medal event at the 2022 Asian Games to be hosted in Hangzhou, China (Myers, 2017). Finally, YouTube, a content creation website founded in 2005, has 2.6 billion monthly active users and over 122 million daily active users in 2022. In 2021, its advertising revenue alone was $8.6 billion (Aslam, 2022).

Since YouTube videos are the main data collected in this study, it should be noted that this dataset is publicly available, secondary data contained within one specific social platform. This research design provides several advantages, as outlined by Cheng and Phillips (2014). First, it reduced the research cost because YouTube videos are free to access. Second, this research collected YouTube videos created by consumer stewards, and for consumer stewards to demonstrate the previously mentioned characteristics, a certain level of professionalism can be asserted. By its definition, professionalism suggests a certain level of competence, skill, regularity and planning. As such, if we traded consumer stewards as a unique profession, then by reviewing the popularity of YouTube content creators, it's easier to identify who is most influential within the profession of consumer stewards. Third, by looking at data generated from one single social platform, it was assured that all data could be collected using the same method and that the generated data were all in the same format. Last, the availability of the data reduced the duration of the data collecting process, allowing more time to engage with the data, which encouraged creative use and interpretation of the data (Cheng & Phillips, 2014, p. 374).

Like with all research designs, there are disadvantages to using this approach. As Cheng and Phillips (2014) stated, the inherent issue with any dataset is that it might not be able to address certain research questions or test a particular hypothesis. Also, the data may not address all population subgroups or all geographic regions (Cheng & Phillips, 2014, p. 374). For example, users of other social media platforms might interact differently due to platform differences and/or

user population differences (Baumöl et al., 2016). However, for this study, it was determined that the advantages secondary data offered outweighed the potential disadvantages.

Regarding ethics, this study will examine three YouTube content creators. Their real-world name will not be mentioned; however, their screen name, also known as their celebrity brand name, will be used to identify each of them. This should not raise issues of ethical concern because their name is their celebrity brand, which means they are public knowledge by the definition of being a 'celebrity' and a 'brand'. In the past, many studies used celebrities' or brands' names without ethical concerns. For example, Armstrong Jr (1990, p. 467) referred to the actor Bela Lugosi (the player of Dracula) and other celebrities by their true name. Another example can be seen in the study by García-Rapp and Roc-Cuberes (2017, p. 2), where they referred to a celebrity by her screen name Bubz and further identified her as 'British-Chinese guru'. In fact, some researchers even identify common celebrity fans using their screen names. One example can be seen in a celebrity study by Van den Bulck et al. (2014, p. 517) where they quoted both the celebrities' and fans' words. These fans were identified using their screen name, for example, '@aquarius64'.

The research design centred on a specific eSport brand, *StarCraft II*. A study of the *StarCraft II* community provides the kind of rich, complex environment typical of many online community settings. As Wang et al. (2022) stated, such ‘community is held together by players of the game, loyal fans and audiences, and commercial actors. Held together by shared interests but also disparate values, this context enabled us to trace how consumer stewards become critical figures in highly complex online community settings’ (p. 249). To provide context to the community, this research also analysed a documentary film on the *StarCraft II* eSports community, *Good Game* (Ratliff, 2014), which provided background context and interviews from brand owners and consumer stewards that are difficult to obtain.

The research questions underpinning this study are:

1. What are the practices of consumer stewards within the context of an online consumer community?
2. What are the constraining or enabling factors/rules within community norms and behaviours that govern consumer stewards’ practices?
3. How do consumer stewards evolve our understanding of online community, social hierarchy and consumer-generated value?

1.5. Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter 1, the introductory chapter, provided an overview of the research focus, highlighted the significance of the research and broadly outlined the research approach. In Chapter 2, the literature review, the notion of consumer stewards is explored and broken down into its fundamental conceptual elements, which both define the term and give it meaning within the existing literature. To achieve this, the literature review is divided into two sections. Section 2.1: Consumer Culture Theory and Identity Literatures aims to place consumer stewards within the current literature field. It presents the main research streams that were used, that is, consumer culture theory and literature on social identity construction. Section 2.2: Three Literature Streams introduces media and communication (information and communication technology [ICT] advancement aspect), Bourdieu's social theory (social structure aspect) and powers (persuasion and influence aspect) as the triplex literature topics that deeply impacted and were impacted by consumer stewards. This is also where the gaps in the existing literature are identified.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology, structure and design used to answer the research questions. This study used two methods to study consumer stewards, both centred on consumer stewards of the *StarCraft II* brand community. The first method involved a documentary film that contained interviews with consumer stewards, brand owners as well as brand communities. The second method involved adopting a netnographic approach by studying *StarCraft II* YouTubers, their creative content and their communications with their followers (i.e. *StarCraft* communities). The rationale for using these methods is explained and justified in this chapter. In Chapter 4, the findings derived from the two methods are presented in the form of a summary of highlights and anomalies.

Chapter 5 describes the analysis of the findings in Section 5.2: Analysis and discusses the findings in Section 5.3: Discussion. Section 5.2: Analysis presents this study's first analysis of the documentary findings from various perspectives, highlighting the relationship between consumer stewards, brand owners and brand communities. This study examined the data of the netnographic research and analysed them according to the four identified characteristics of consumer stewards: consumer, leader, marketer and producer. By analysing the data through the lens of these roles, this study provided important new insights into how consumer stewards accumulate and exchange power and capital to establish their unique social position. In Section 5.3: Discussion, the discussion is separated into three sections, each aimed to answer a specific research question.

Chapter 6 presents a summary of the study's research findings and its contribution to our understanding and theory concerning the nature and role of consumer stewards, the factors constraining or enabling their emergence and the implications for understanding the generation of social, cultural, creative and economic capital within the digital environment. The limitations and recommendations for future research are also discussed in detail.

In conclusion, the present chapter provided an introduction and justification for this important study of a contemporary phenomenon, utilising Bourdieu's classical theory. In the next chapter, the literature review will be presented, which will outline the theoretical position of this study and examine the phenomenon of consumer stewards. By so doing, it provides the theoretical basis from which the research proceeded.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter analyses the literature relevant to the phenomenon of consumer stewards. To position consumer stewards within the specific field of literature, identify the phenomenon's potential impact using relevant literature and highlight the gaps within the existing literature, this chapter is divided into two sections: Section 2.1: Consumer Culture Theory and Identity Literature and Section 2.2: Three Streams of Existing Literature. Each section identifies key research streams that informed our interpretation of consumer stewards as community figures, marketing mediators and cultural leaders within an online community. In doing so, Section 2.1: Consumer Culture Theory and Identity Literature places consumer stewards within consumer culture theory and highlights the literature on identities and narrative creation as the key to understanding the presence, operation and impact of consumer stewards within the brand community. Section 2.2: Three Streams of Existing Literature draws upon and identifies the fields of media and communication, Bourdieu's social theory literature and the literature on power as the triplex literature topics that deeply impacted and were impacted by consumer stewards, as well as the gaps in the existing literature. Each of these research streams reflects a distinctive marketing and consumer behaviour sub-theme, which is highlighted throughout the discussed literature as a distinct commercial orientation, and its impact on behaviours within the brand community is examined.

Table 2.1 provides an overview of the conceptual framework developed from the strands of literature, while Figure 2.1 shows how each conceptual framework is linked to form the overarching theoretical foundation of the study.

Table 2.1
Overview of the Conceptual Framework

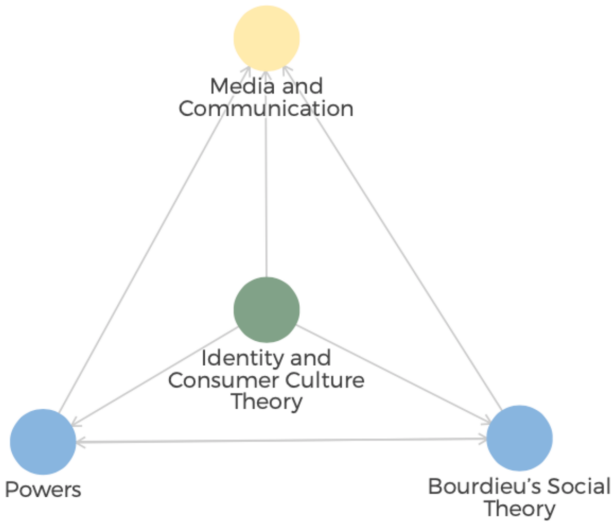
	Strand of Literature	Conceptual Framework	Notable Authors and Contribution
Section 2.1	Identity and consumer culture theory	• The identity-generated narrative that creates one's reality, which influences and is influenced by other people's realities • Consumers use consumption as a narrative to create their identities; their engagement level creates subcultures of consumption, brand community and brand tribe • The highest engagement creates tribe leaders (i.e. consumer stewards)	• Arnould and Thompson (2005) stated that consumers are identity seekers and makers • Schouten and McAlexander (1995) stated that subcultures of consumption are created through consumers' desire to create meaningful identity through consumption a particular product • Sigamoney (2016) stated that subcultures of consumption groups express ever-changing identity • Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) stated that brand community identify group member through a shared consciousness, ritual, traditions and obligations, which express a fixed and stable identity within subcultures of consumption • Kates (2002) stated that brand community has hierarchy, which is created through various level of engagement by its member

			• Costa e. Silva and Carnido dos Santos (2012) stated that consumer tribes/brand tribes are small groups within brand communities that has shared belief and an opinion/tribe leader at its centre
Section 2.2	Bourdieu's social theory	• An individual's social position is determined by the field and habitus they occupy as well as the combination of various volumes and forms of capital they possess • One's social trajectory can be changed through obtaining and exchanging various forms of capital, which is a reconstruction of one's social identity	• Bourdieu (1984) laid the framework of social theory with emphasis on his concept of both habitus and field
	Powers	• Forms of power available to the modern consumer • Through the exercise of power, it can be translated into various forms of capital	• French and Raven (1959) identified five bases of power: legitimate, reward, expert, referent and coercive • Raven (1965) identified sixth base of power: information
	Media and communication	• Brand owner's influence = programmability	• Van Dijck and Poell (2013) stated the three elements to examine social media logic: programmability, popularity and connectivity

- (Privileged/popular) Consumer negotiates power (engagement) with brand owner = popularity + connectivity

Figure 2.1

Figure of the Conceptual Framework



2.1. Consumer Culture Theory and Identity Literature

In the introductory chapter, it was suggested that consumer stewards are a group of consumers that behaves and operates contrary to the traditional definition of consumer. This implies that consumer stewards represent a different circle of consumption and, through this unique consumption process, redefine themselves within the consumer group and beyond. The purpose of this section is to place consumer stewards within the consumer culture theory literature and to highlight consumer identity construction and reconstruction as the key conceptual framework for understanding this phenomenon. To do so, this section will be further divided into two parts. The first part (Section 2.1.1: Consumer Culture Theory) will examine the literature on consumer culture theory to focus on consumer identity creation through the course of consumption. The second part (Section 2.1.2: Identity) will build upon the notion of consumer identity construction and explore it as a cultural and social product of narrative creation.

2.1.1. Consumer Culture Theory

Since consumer stewards present a unique consumption process, identifying and understanding consumption is a core component of this thesis. Our understanding of consumption can be traced back to work by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) who suggested that rather than studying consumer behaviour purely through information processing, one should also enrich and supplement the process with experiential perspectives. This is because consumers are emotional beings; thus, their consumption patterns will be influenced by many outside forces. It was argued

by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) that consumers are symbolic beings who are not only interested in what a product can do but also in what a product means to them. This notion allowed succeeding researchers to approach consumption as a construct of consumer culture. Consumer culture is the belief that material possessions can reveal the nature of a given consumer. Consumers are defined by what they consume, construct their own style of living (Earl, 1986) and create their social identity (Friedman, 2005). Hence, consumer culture theory 'concerns the co-constitutive, co-productive ways in which consumers, working with marketer-generated materials, forge a coherent if diversified and often fragmented sense of self' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871). In other words, consumers are identity seekers and makers, that is, they look for new identities as well as create their own ones (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871), and they use the market to build an image that reflects their self-identity (Sigamoney, 2016, p. 4).

It is important to note that Consumer Culture Theory does not imply that products or brands play a passive role in shaping the consumer's identity. Instead, it suggests that the consumer's behaviour and the significance they assign to products and brands must be understood within the broader cultural and social context. Sherry and Fischer (2017) proposed an approach to studying the consumer's relationship with products and brands as a component of deeply intertwined cultural and social practices. In other words, consumption is the reflection and construction of social norms.

It should also be mentioned that, in this study, consumption is not one of economic necessity as described by Bourdieu (1984). Instead of 'workers eat beans because they cannot afford anything else' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 178), workers choose to eat beans because it is part of their social identity or the social identity they choose to present to the outside world. As such, the concept of materialism and its associated behaviours are highly relevant to the construct of consumer culture.

The word *materialism* can be defined as 'the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions' (Belk, 1985, p. 265). For some people, these worldly possessions become their greatest source of satisfaction in life (Podoshen et al., 2014). This satisfaction is not just about happiness; rather, economic capital is often exchanged for cultural capital to allow individuals to obtain a higher social standing in other people's view (Bourdieu, 1984). This acknowledgement by others through the display of wealth (Podoshen et al., 2014, p. 272) is an attempt to construct and reconstruct one's social identity by associating/attaching oneself to a specific social group/class (Jenkins, 2014, p. 17). However, this is simply an attempt, as

Bourdieu (1984) suggested, as this action does not usually lead to a fundamental change in the social status of the individual. Nevertheless, materialism – as the study of Richins (1994) implied – tends to lead people to place a higher value on items that can be shown or seen in public. This elicits admiration, or even envy, from the public, which then feeds back to the owner as pleasure. Indeed, such a display of status is a key feature of materialism: it is 'seen as a value that influences the way people interpret the structure of their life and their living environment' (Podoshen et al., 2014, p. 273). In addition to being a means to elevate one's own status, materialism is also used as a way to judge others. Richins and Dawson (1992) stated that the possession of material objects is often used as a measure of success and happiness. Veer and Shankar (2011) argued that when individuals are highly materialistic and place possessions at the centre of their lives, there is a tendency to judge the members of their community – as well as themselves – on the possessions they own.

This leads to one of the research streams within the consumer culture theory, namely, consumer identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumer identity projects suggest that the consumer builds their self-identity through their acquisitions (Sigamoney, 2016, p. 3), which echoes the Bourdieusian framework regarding individuals and groups that attempt to alter their class status within their level of society through the exchange of capital (Allen & Anderson, 1994, p. 70). This creates a subculture of consumption with its own styles, behaviour patterns and values (Kozinets, 2001). Indeed, consumer culture itself, according to the Bourdieusian conceptualisation, is composed of many subcultures of consumption, each with its unique value and normative discourse (Arsel & Thompson, 2011, p. 793).

2.1.1.1. Subcultures of Consumption. Subcultures of consumption can be defined as unique social groups that subvert their dominant ideology through consumption. These consumers 'arise from the desire of people to identify themselves with some specific products and brands and establish meaningful relationships' (Koetz & Tankersley, 2016, p. 23). Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 43) defined subcultures of consumption as 'a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity'. Hence, members of these subcultures communicate and interact with each other through their consumption of the same products, brands or consumption activities. It is important to realise that, in this context, the consumption of products is integral to the expression of the consumer's identity (Koetz & Tankersley, 2016, p. 25). It must also be noted that the members of subcultures of consumption do not have a fixed identity associated with the product or brand; these identities are dynamic, and – in order to express their ever-changing identity – members frequently alternate between different

subcultures of consumption groups (Sigamoney, 2016, p. 2).Indeed, this ever-changing identity could be considered a way for an individual to be accepted as part of the subculture. After all, as Saren (2007) remarked in their study on the Indian immigrant community, each immigrant had their own desires that may or may not have conflicted with the desires of the others. However, through consumption choices, people seemed to be 'stitch[ing] together an identity that represents the self to themselves and others' (p. 467). In fact, Saren (2007, p. 467) argued that this stitching process 'does not have to reconcile contradictions but can incorporate them using products to signify associations'. Of course, depending on different consumption paths, which aligns individuals with certain groups/cultures and alienates others. Hence, an identity created through the subculture of consumption is social identity, and as with any social identity, it can be influenced by a large variety of external factors.

2.1.1.2. Brand Community. The term *brand* is important, not because it represents a commercial product but because it acts as a representation or focus point for the community or subculture of consumption. Previous research, such as that by Koetz and Tankersley (2016), pointed to the fact that the brand itself is not as important as the emotional significance consumers might attribute to it. According to the social identity theory, the reason consumers join a brand community is to 'fulfil the need for identification with symbols and groups' (Habibi et al., 2014, p. 154). Woermann (2011) analysed subculture communities from a sociological viewpoint, emphasizing the importance of identity development within these groups. He concurred that people derive a significant part of their identity from the communities they aspire to. He used the term "prosumption" to explain how consumers co-create and shape brand experiences, and even affect other consumers' perceptions and behaviours.

Kozinets (2001) argued that the central imagery of many subcultures 'often relies on mass media repressions for its mythical icons, places, and time' (p. 67). In a study of the Star Trek community, Kozinets (2001) found that through the multilayered presentation of the brand, the message and meaning turned advertisements for the brand into a kind of religion or myth, which served to distance the brand from its status as a commercial product. Ultimately, this allowed fans to invest themselves in the brand and construct a sense of self that is unique to the subculture (Koetz & Tankersley, 2016). This, as Fournier and Lee (2009) stated, allowed the group of consumers to create an entire lifestyle and share activities around the brand. Like a traditional community, a brand community has the same characteristics of shared consciousness, rituals, traditions and obligations to society (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). On the one hand, members of brand communities tend to seek out like-minded individuals who share similar

relationships with a particular brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). On the other hand, when individuals join this community, they then identify with the brand, thus allowing individual identity to become collective identity (Goellner et al., 2017). This shared sense of identity and consciousness also means that the brand community can have a 'centralised and conservative power structure located around the products and core values of a brand' (Canniford, 2011, p. 594). This also allows for new relationships and social ties to be formed, in addition to enabling individuals to explore new ways to express their identity (Bates et al., 2020) and social identification (Ellemers et al., 1999). There are various ways/dimensions on which a brand community can be examined and categorised. A study by D'Albergaria Freitas and de Almeida (2017) listed 10 dimensions and provided a condensed summary of each dimension that can serve to deepen our understanding of brand community. These dimensions include geographical, social context, temporality, identification bases, spatial, communication, level of participation, opening, governance, and social interaction (p. 89). One common theme among these dimensions is social identification with others using a particular brand as an intermediary. The formation of such a community is both intentional and voluntary (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009), as members of the community derive shared activities through their own consumption choices. Since it is created and maintained by the effort of the consumer, consumer engagement is an issue that has to be discussed because it is clearly able to go beyond the purchase transaction (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Engagement creates the hierarchy within the subculture (Kates, 2002); as such, it also creates the hierarchy within the brand community. However, what is this engagement? How should one define it? Patterson et al. (2006) described engagement as being comprised of vigour, dedication, absorption and interaction. This process is physical, but it is clearly also psychological in that it involves cognition and emotion (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Considering the shared consciousness, rituals, traditions and obligations to society (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412), one must participate to be accepted by the community. Engagement is participation, but through this process, identity is constructed beyond the behavioural dimension of engagement. As such, D'Albergaria Freitas and de Almeida (2017, p. 100) conceptualised 'engagement as a distinct construct of participation itself'.

This emotional and cognitive engagement on the part of consumers allows them to demonstrate their trust and commitment to the brand (Brodie et al., 2013). Subsequently, some of the most engaged consumers, namely consumer stewards, are able to perform roles that go beyond those of ordinary consumers, including learning; sharing of information, knowledge and experience; advocating for the brand; and socialising and co-creating with the brand and brand owner (Brodie

et al., 2013). It must be emphasised that these roles could not be possible without a strong commitment (Marchi et al., 2011).

Since brand communities demand a certain amount of emotional and cognitive investment from their members, this naturally has the ability to influence members' perceptions and actions (Algesheimer et al., 2005, p. 19), for example, instil loyalty, generate consumer satisfaction and create connections and emotional ties (Brodie et al., 2013). Algesheimer et al. (2005, p. 20) employed the concept of 'brand community identification', that is, how individuals construct themselves as belonging to a brand community. Brand community identification suggests a clear cognitive process whereby the individual internalises a sense of belonging to the brand community. In their study, Algesheimer et al. (2005, p. 20) suggested that the more the individual identifies with the community, the easier it is to internalise these norms as part of their identity, as opposed to this internalisation being a requirement or expectation of the brand community. This process of integration and internalisation is important because it functions as the individual's perceived relationship with both the community and the brand itself (Algesheimer et al., 2005, p. 23). Indeed, 'the most successful brands provide a foundation to community, they give consumers a voice and provide a sense of belonging that supports their identity' (Busby & Cronshaw, 2015, p. 99).

This sense of belonging goes hand in hand with a sense of brand loyalty. Loyalty to a brand is not as simple as the consumer only wanting to purchase a specific brand; it is also about promoting the brand. According to Thomson (2006), brand loyalty can be explained by the concept of 'human brands'. This refers to the brand and the story behind it, including 'a name, a reputation, a credibility and an image' (Thomson, 2006, p. 104). Thomson believed that storytelling and narrative play a crucial role in evoking emotions in consumers, which leads to stronger connections between consumers and the human brand, ultimately resulting in increased consumer engagement and loyalty. By analyzing the narratives shared within brand communities, it is possible to cultivate authentic relationships within those communities and foster long-term brand loyalty.

Goellner et al. (2017) claimed that 'consumers who have an affinity towards a brand want to share their experiences with like-minded individuals' (p. 416). This is why brand loyalty is so important for the brand owner, as loyal consumers are likely to endorse the brand to their network of contacts, and unlike paid marketers, they usually have intrinsic motivation. As such, a brand community is always considered to be relationship marketing, which is aimed at solving the costs of one-on-one relationships with the customer (Habibi et al., 2014, p. 153). In other words,

establishing and maintaining brand loyalty within the loyal consumer is considered highly important for the brand owner because it allows customers to be served on behalf of the brand (Laroche et al., 2012, p. 6). In this sense, members of a brand community are more than just consumers – they are also promoters and advocates of the brand (Cova & Cova, 2002). In this context, brand communities enable a company to be more competitive and build and maintain relationships with its consumer base (Fournier et al., 2005).

However, despite the obvious benefits that consumer loyalty offers the brand owner, it also represents a huge inconsistency with regard to the outcomes. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) argued that there is a tendency to assume that like-minded consumers forming a community leads to 'more purchase behaviours and be[ing] more loyal' (p. 46). However, this is not always the case. Being part of a group and being identified with said group do not automatically result in brand loyalty. Likewise, a product having a consumer community does not automatically lead to an increase in purchases (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 413), the three principles that guide brand communities are 'consciousness of a kind', 'traditions and rituals' and 'sense of duty'. Among these, Goellner et al. (2017, p. 425) argued that a 'sense of duty is a decisive mediator of social identity and brand community behaviours'. Consequently, if individuals feel responsible for their brand community, they are more likely to take action to benefit it by either helping other members, endorsing the brand or purchasing the product. Goellner et al. (2017, p. 425) posited that social identity is not enough to 'trigger brand-related behaviour' and that certain individuals who feel a sufficient sense of duty towards their community are those who initiate this sort of behaviour. In this context, in order for brand communities to benefit a brand, these unique individuals are necessary, and this is where consumer stewards enter the picture.

2.1.1.3. Consumer Tribe/Brand Tribe. The notion is that consumer stewards, as their label suggests, are not merely part of a community but also stewards of their community. Since their communities are part of the greater brand community, it is appropriate to label them as consumer tribes. Consumer tribes are smaller consumer groups that are situated within the larger brand community. The term 'tribes' can be defined as 'networks of people gathering together for social interaction, often around consumption and brands' (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012, p. 421). There are two reasons why the word tribe is used here. First, the members of a tribe have a shared belief in the brand (Sigamoney, 2016, p. 2). Second, each tribe has an opinion leader (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012, p. 422) who uses their skills, knowledge or personality to influence others through word of mouth. These opinion leaders become promoters or advocates for the brand (Cova & Cova, 2002;

Hemetsberger, 2008). These leaders are, in fact, consumer stewards. Since consumer stewards are unique and important because they are the leaders of their tribes, it is necessary to examine the impact of their tribes in the existing literature.

The difference between a consumer tribe and a brand community is that the consumer is no longer defined by the cost and benefits of their choice but rather by the experience of consumption. There is an emotional link among its members. *Emotional* is an important term that needs to be highlighted, for neither the marketer nor the product determines the value of this link; instead, it is the consumer, or more specifically, the consumer with the highest engagement, who determines it.

This active role on the part of consumer stewards can be called consumer activism. Hemetsberger (2008) argued that through this activism, brand communities are able to turn creative communities into entrepreneurial tribes. In this context, consumers take on the role of consumer agency and become consumer-producers, working with the brand and becoming part of the service (Kozinets et al., 2004). Hemetsberger (2008) raised two main points of interest. First, they did not see the relationship between consumers and brand owners as a struggle for power and control; instead, they placed emphasis on cooperation between the two sides. Second, the findings of their study revealed that 'entrepreneurial tribes are able to act within the dominant capitalist market logic however, without giving up their identity' (Hemetsberger, 2008, p. 345). This echoed earlier literature on the construction of social identity, where it is unique to the individual but not isolated from the identity of the dominant class (Parmentyier & Rolland, 2009).

The social identity created by consumer stewards is capable of forming its own brand. To demonstrate this, one could draw upon the study by Busby and Cronshaw (2015) on the Tea Party as a political brand. The Tea Party was a political movement that was part of the Republican Party in the United States. It was a consumer-led brand movement that sought to represent a group of consumers who were dissatisfied with the political party after the 2008 election result (Busby & Cronshaw, 2015, p. 97).

The Tea Party was a brand created by a consumer tribe, which eventually became one of the most potent forces in American politics. The reason for this can be found when one looks at what gives a brand its value. A brand is considered valuable if it can provide consumer benefits, either on a functional or emotional satisfaction level (Aaker, 1996, p. 68). In this case, the Tea Party was able to serve the dual purpose of allowing the consumer to be part of an influential brand identity creation and consumption of the same product (Busby & Cronshaw, 2015, p. 98).

Consumer tribes are capable of creating influential brands of their own. Furthermore, one could analyse this influence in terms of narrative transportation as a persuasive process, as in the study by Richardson (2013). The concept of narrative transportation was originally conceived by Gerrig (1993). Simply put, assume an instance where people need transportation to travel from one world to another and then to return; as with all journeys, those who take such a journey are changed by it. Richardson (2013) argued that consumer tribes are capable of creating a narrative world that people can travel through and that those who do so are ultimately affected by it. Simply put, consumer tribes help formulate identity (Busby & Cronshaw, 2015), and identity is expressed through narrative (Watson, 2009). In this case, the emphasis is on the persuasiveness of the narrative by looking at narrative as transportation on a journey that reshapes someone's own narrative, identity and behaviour (for example, purchase initiation).

This concept of a journey is interesting, since it suggests that consumer stewards and, by extension, consumer tribes (of their creation) are capable of creating a reality that is as great and encompassing as that of a field in a Bourdieusian framework (Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, the field that consumer tribes create has certain very clear rules, making it resistant to outside influences. Kornberger (2010) stated that members of a tribe often form a certain image of their tribe's identity, and they can be resistant to a marketer's attempts to alter this image. Richardson (2013) described this situation as follows: 'the marketer provides an initial indication of possible meaning, [and] the tribe will regard this as a point of departure rather than a final destination' (p. 124). Since the members of consumer tribes are highly active, they are not only able to 'imagine their identity but also to perform it' (Richardson, 2013, p. 124). This gives consumer tribes a powerful position in the persuasion process, in addition to a powerful social position within the social structure.

2.1.1.4. Consumer Culture Theory Summary and Logic Links. In the first part of Section 2.1: Consumer Culture Theory and Identity Literature, the literature on consumer culture theory allowed us to see how and where consumer stewards fit into the existing literature. First, consumer stewards are the product of consumer culture. It is clear that consumers build their identities using both the products and brands purchased, which is the concept behind the theory of consumer culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). However, as this section attempted to place consumer stewards within the conceptual framework of subcultural consumption, brand communities and brand tribes, it became clear that consumer stewards are not merely passive receivers or members of a consumption culture; they are also active producers, collaborators or organisers for a consumer culture that they actively take part in and shape (Cova & Cova, 2002).

Consumer stewards achieve this by constructing their own consumer tribe (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012). The key word summarise this activity is 'engagement', which allows disparities to appear within the consumer group when those consumers with the highest engagement start to stand out and take on a leadership role of their own tribe. It is those consumers who will ultimately become consumer stewards (Cova & Cova, 2002) because they show the highest level of engagement (Kates, 2002) in a social hierarchy structured by members' commitment (Brodie et al., 2013; D'Albergaria Freitas & de Almeida, 2017).

This engagement has a strong emotional factor behind it because the deeper we analyse the core of consumer culture, the more it becomes about the emotional significance of a brand rather than the brand itself (Koetz & Tankersley, 2016). Rituals, traditions (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), trust, loyalty and commitment (Brodie et al., 2013) are all signs of consumers' emotional investment (Koetz & Tankersley, 2016). This suggest that consumer stewards, being the leaders of their consumer tribes, are capable of exhibiting a high level of emotional investment as well as enlisting emotional investment from members of their tribes.

The question is, how do consumer stewards achieve this? If the result of consumer culture is about the construction and reconstruction of social identity (Friedman, 2005), then it can be theorised that consumer stewards, being part of or the producer/facilitator of consumer culture, must have a unique social identity. This suggests that identity and its related literature need to be researched to further identify the notion of consumer steward. In the next section of the literature review, the relevant literature related to identity construction and reconstruction will be reviewed as theoretical background to the ensuing study.

2.1.2. Identity

In this section, the concept of identity, especially online identity, will be examined. This is because the concept of consumer tribes can be better identified within an online environment (Kozinets, 2002b; Muñiz & Schau, 2005). However, online identity can function differently in comparison to its physical counterpart. As such, these differences have to be addressed. One focus of this section will be on how online identity constructs one's reality, both for oneself and others, and on the concept of narrative being a key component between identity and reality.

2.1.2.1. Identity Construction. Identity is an interesting term. We often treat it as something concrete, but it is 'a kind of virtual home which we must refer back to in order to explain a certain number of things, but which has never existed in reality' (Lévi-Strauss, 1979, p. 332). To trace the construction of identity, researchers place great emphasis on external factors. One perspective is that identity is constructed through one's background, family,

language, beliefs or shared practices within the local community to which one belongs. For instance, McCreery and Best (2004, p. 6) provided the example of a refugee Zimbabwean girl's poem in which she described how the word 'refugee' replaced her name, past, personality and hope. This may seem somewhat extreme, but as Hongladarom (2011, p. 535) stated, 'identity is constituted more by external factors rather than solely on the subject's own mental content … This is because identity is not the same as uniqueness; the 'I' has no way to account for uniqueness without taking account of external factors'.

Indeed, the 'I' and the external factors Hongladarom (2011) mentioned have been approached by other researchers to construct models to describe identity. Kahane et al. (2002) stated that '[identity] is not sold on the market, nor can it be decreed. It can be dreamed and proclaimed, but it becomes a social reality only when it is experienced, manifested, and perceived by outside observers' (p. 127). Similarly, Parmentyier and Rolland (2009, p. 44) made a distinction between social and individual identity. People can have a paradoxical position – they want to feel that they belong to a group, but they wish to be noticed at the same time. Likewise, Popescu (2019, p. 69) stated that '[identity] represents the expression of a person's individuality in the context of a person's affiliation to certain groups, the ability to differentiate oneself amidst the crowd'. In other words, identity is born of a dual psychological process – first, a process of emotional development stemming from being part of society, and second, the creation of multiple roles or possible selves through imagination and experience (Parmentyier & Rolland, 2009).

The notion of a dual psychological process provides insights into how a consumer steward's identity is developed within the consumer community. The social identity created by a consumer steward can be viewed as an anchor in the relationship between the individual and the group (Cooley, 1922). When an individual regards themself as a member of a collective, then that collective identity becomes what is known as social identity (Kashima, 2014, p. 87). Stryker (1980) argued that the individual's identity is made up of various socially determined roles, although this means that the individual is limited by these roles (Bates et al., 2020). Of course, these roles can be either passive or active. The earlier example of the word 'refugee' used to label a Zimbabwean girl is one of passive attribution (McCreery & Best, 2004). However, this can be changed through actively engaging in the development of a new and overriding identity. Indeed, this is the whole point of a consumer actively changing their status within a community. As Parmentyier and Rolland (2009) stated, 'today it is up to the individual, considered to be an independent subject in terms of his or her status in the community, to build their own identity' (p. 45). This individual identity-building 'depends on a multitude of elements like self-image

(mental representation of a person about oneself), self-esteem and individuality' (Popescu, 2019, p. 69).

Since identity is social and social means dealing with constant change, identity tends to be reactive. The concept of identity theory, as proposed by Burke and Stets (2022), describes how individuals actively construct and manage their identities within social contexts. They emphasize the understanding of both internal (subjective inner worlds of individuals) and external (outward representation of one's self) identity creation, and how one internal process would "enter" the external and vice versa (Burke & Stets, 2022, p. 658). This dynamic nature of identity formation allows individuals to actively navigate their social environments to maintain their identities through social interactions and relationships. Social Identity, the external identity, is built to 'anticipate people's reactions based on the desired or tailored self-image' (Popescu, 2019, p. 67). In addition, an identity that is built may appear greater than reality, either to compensate for the lack of other sensory or perceived inputs (Geidner et al., 2007) or simply to attempt to be the best within a group of people (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). Indeed, among a group of people, an individual will react and express their identity in a way that resonates with the group (Young, 2009b). Jenkins (2014) asserted that the difference between self-identity and social identity is an analytical one, suggesting that the two are mutually constitutive. This notion is further explained by Watson (2009), who stated that when people communicate, they both make sense of the world around them as well as who they are within that world (p. 432). This is important, as it provides the conceptual base for how the identity of consumer stewards can be used as a tool of influence through their interaction with their tribal members. A consumer steward can be seen as an active marketer of their identity, while others will reactively create a social identity that encompasses the consumer steward's identity (Young, 2009b).

2.1.2.2. Online Identity. As discussed in earlier sections, consumers are changing through ICT. The physical social space has expanded to include the digital realm. With regard to identity creation in the digital versus the physical space, some scholars made a distinction between the two (Bates et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2008a), while others made an effort to blur the distinction (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). One of the many reasons why the distinction is made can be seen in a study by Bates et al. (2020, p. 63) on LGBTQ sexual identity. They revealed that the online world was often perceived as 'safe' (for example, anonymity), which allowed the user to explore 'their nonnormative, but still developing identity' and enabled 'an opening of a dialogue (both intra and interpersonally) about how they [might] go about defining this difference in identity' (Bates et al. (2020, p. 63).

Zhao et al. (2008a) pointed to the distinction between online and offline environments in the construction of identity. In the offline context, identity is constructed through face-to-face interactions. As such, the construction takes place under a unique set of constraints. For instance, an individual's physical characteristics, such as sex, race and appearance, cannot be hidden. Certain aspects of the individual, such as behaviour, mannerisms and unique personality attributes, are visible, and it is very difficult for an individual to pretend to be someone else. On the other hand, in an online context, the 'corporeal body is detached from social encounters' (Zhao et al., 2008a, p. 1817), and this enables the individual to conduct social interaction without revealing their physical characteristics. As a result, this allows a new identity to be produced. Young (2009b) echoed this notion by stating that although some people may believe that socialising online can cause harm because it detracts from face-to-face communication, the more time spent on online communication means an 'increased likelihood of mastery of the socially valued cognitive tools', which allows a new form of identity to be created (p. 52).

Some researchers, such as RĂDĂAn (2014), presented the concept of online identity rather negatively by stating that it is actually a form of dissociative identity that develops when individuals cannot express themselves in their material reality. Thus, a new identity is adopted to protect themselves from 'personal failures and [one] adopts an image which gives [one] safety, surrounded by imaginary friends while looking for a family to provide a sense of fulfilment' (RĂDĂAn, 2014, p. 348). This leads to one of the most important questions about online identity: is online identity a correct or real representation of offline identity? As Popescu (2019) suggested, 'it is said that all the individuals online build their alternate personas for an environment meant for revealing themselves to others. Entirely new personae are presented to the public' (p. 68). Young (2009b) spoke of online identity as something that 'permanently "stands in" for their physical self' (p. 40).

Treating online and offline identities as separate entities is one way to approach the issue of online identity. However, the second is to consider online identity as a mere reflection of one's physical identity. According to Bates et al. (2020), '[e]arly online experiences were generally distinct from offline life, but as social media use increases bridging the physical and digital, online identities have become more consistent with offline selves' (p. 55). Indeed, some research suggested that online personae are not only consistent with offline selves but are not 'new personae' at all. Instead, they may be individuals' attempts at either impression management or personal branding (Young, 2009b). Impression management is defined as an attempt to 'control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions' (Schneider, 1981, pp. 23-40).

Personal branding is a way for people to market themselves, just as a company manages its brand. Put simply, it is done to make an individual stand out among a group. The approach that focuses on impression management and personal branding suggests that online identity is a mask disguising the true nature of the person behind it. Other researchers, like Zhao et al. (2008a), after studying Facebook use in Thailand, suggested that the identity constructed on a social networking website tends to reflect much of the user's true identity. Indeed, even if we were to assume that, through the adoption of impression management and personal branding, the online self is just a mask created to represent the offline self, the online self is still made up of physical and mental aspects that link back to the offline self. Components such as images, sounds and texts are physical, while the persona-like thinking or feeling that surface from the texts and other symbols are mental (Hongladarom, 2011, pp. 535-536).

Another way to claim that online identity as mere reflect of the physical identity is by consider the concept of positional and figured identity. Roth and Stuedahl (2020) stated that identities are comprised of both positional (experiences) and figured (self-created), and these operate within the social context of figured worlds. Although Roth and Stuedahl (2020) did not specifically address the topic of online versus offline identity, they emphasized that 'identity is not constrained by prescribed categories such as gender or ethnicity, but is instead negotiated and socially produced' (Roth & Stuedahl, 2020, p. 85). In the physical world, individuals are regularly "figured out" based on their positional identities (through negotiation of social interaction), which in-turn contribute to the formation of their figured identity. Thus, it might be argued that the online realm positions individuals in ways that are not possible offline, resulting in a seemingly new persona that is still rooted in the same individuals negotiate their identities online.

A final approach to understanding online and offline identity is through a process of fusion. The reason that these two can be fused is that every reality can be considered informational, regardless of whether it is online or offline (Floridi, 2008). Hongladarom (2011) argued that this whole debate about online and offline identity is based on the presumption that there are multiple core selves, while a different approach would be to assume 'both the offline and the online selves are ultimately constructions and do not have any essence of its own' (p. 534).

Consumer stewards can be considered to be showcasing all these approaches in their online and offline identities. For example, the elimination of physical characteristics in the online environment, pointed out by Zhao et al. (2008a), can be best demonstrated by the increasing popularity of VTubers (virtual YouTubers). VTubers are online entertainers who use two-

dimensional (2D) or three-dimensional (3D) computer-generated characters to engage in online activities (Liudmila, 2020). By using face and hand tracking technology, those 2D or 3D characters are able to interact with the audience, and the animation appeal has been highlighted in many studies (Kang, 2021; Liudmila, 2020; Saputra & Setyawan, 2021). In the case of VTubers, their real-life identities are hidden behind their virtual avatars, and they are still able to gain community support (Lu et al., 2021, p. 2). This requires unique identity management, since there is a clear separation between private and public identity (Lu et al., 2021, p. 8).

Of course, not all consumer stewards create a virtual identity. Many online celebrities have no problem disclosing elements of their physical lives and often use this approach as an opportunity to create a bond with their followers. After all, social identity is created through social interaction (Schneider, 1981). In 2019, twitch streamer LaserBelch organised a 24-hour live stream ahead of their mother's birthday as a fundraising effort to help their struggling mother who, following a divorce, was at risk of becoming homeless. They were able to raise over $11,000 during this live stream, which led to a tearful, emotional reaction from the streamer. To quote their words when they opened, weeping, 'I just wish that I could convey to you guys how unfair life has been to her … So that you guys did this … there's nothing left to say. Thank you guys' (LaserBelch, 2019). In this example, the online identity is only an extension of the individual's physical identity (Bates et al., 2020). There is a clear authenticity aspect to consumer stewards' identity (Aterianus-Owanga, 2015), and there can be no doubt among the audience of LaserBelch (2019) that the identity presented while streaming is the same as the person's identity in the physical world (Bates et al., 2020).

Last, it is not unusual for consumer stewards to have a different physical identity and online identity, but they choose not to hide either one of them. In this case, they acknowledge that both of their identities are part of themselves (Hongladarom, 2011). For example, streamer and YouTuber Zepla was part of the Final Fantasy (FFXIV) gaming community and an *FFXIV* content creator. They are Ukrainian, and in response to the ongoing Russian war with Ukraine, they posted updates of their personal life in Ukraine in early 2022 (Zepla, 2022a). *Final Fantasy XIV* is an online role-playing game with many loving characters, and Zepla had one such character created under their name (Zepla, 2022b). Zepla used it to create much of their online content, and while this content differed greatly from their physical life, it would be wrong to exclude either from Zepla's identity.

As such, in terms of identity construction, rather than viewing the abovementioned approaches (Bates et al., 2020; Hongladarom, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008a) to identity as distinct theories, this

research suggests that they are merely different constructs/expressions of social identity within the notion of consumer stewards. This is important, as it suggests that consumer stewards have a great range of operations and interactions with their communities. It also suggests that identity construction is only part of the equation that makes consumer stewards; the interaction that is created as a result of identity construction is equally important. This social interaction is the social reality created between consumer stewards and their consumer tribe members.

2.1.2.3. Identity and Reality. According to a study by Aterianus-Owanga (2015, p. 146) on Libreville hip-hop practices, the reason that Gabonese rappers were able to create an authentic or real realm within their rap music was that the music resonated with their 'Africanity' or 'African identity'. This feeling of continental pride and identity was the reality the Gabonese rappers created using their continental identity as Africans. In other words, reality is a way for other people to recognise the identity that created it. In the case of African rappers, the reason their music resonated with the listener as manifesting 'African identity' was that the reality the music created allowed for the recognition of tools, language and writing that distinctly represented 'Africanity' (Aterianus-Owanga, 2015, p. 154). Similarly, in a study on how becoming disabled affects long-term sickness benefits recipients' long identity narratives, Garthwaite (2015) conducted 25 in-depth interviews to research the change in identity narratives. It is clear that different patients had different narratives as they worked to construct and reconstruct their identities over time.

One particularly important term from the study mentioned above is narrative. It has been theorised that the way identity creates reality is through the concept of narrative identity (McCreery & Best, 2004), which states that one's identity will change as a result of various influences and how one interprets those influences (Weiss, 2002). According to McCreery and Best (2004, p. 9), '[o]ur identities are not fixed, we have no set "end point", we are constantly changing'. Similarly, Ahuvia (2005, p. 172) echoed this concept in their study on consumer identity, in which they stated that a consumer's sense of identity is structured in terms of a narrative, which means that instead of a person's identity being seen as a series of attributes, it can be seen as a whole story created by that person. This makes it possible to make the connection between a person's past, present and possible future. As suggested by Bates et al. (2020), '[n]arrative identity refers to an individual's developing life story; synthesising characters, plots, and events, and between self and society to bring an overarching explanation and meaning to a string of potentially random life moments' (p. 52). These stories form mental rules and boundaries about how we act and interact within society (Horrocks & Callahan, 2006, p. 70). Watson (2009) pointed out that 'focusing on the narratives that individuals both create and are

influenced by can help keep us attentive to both the internal and the external aspects of identity-making' (p. 427).

2.1.2.4. Narrative. Narratives are not simply mental constructs. They exist all around us in the socially constructed realities of societies (Watson, 2009). These narratives can be understood as elements of societies' stocks of knowledge. A narrative captures 'fragments of identity as it is communicated through representational stories, created from experiences and reflected from individual perspectives' (Horrocks & Callahan, 2006, pp. 69-70). Indeed, as Watson (2009) pointed out, culture is, in effect, a socially constructed reality shared by society as a whole. Things like stories, myths and legends are all narratives that allow people to know without constantly having to ask, 'Who are we?' or, 'Why are we doing this rather than that?' Likewise, Rostron (2014, p. 97) stated that narratives created by an individual, no matter how simple or superficial they may appear to be, can reveal how that individual constructs social reality and their position within it. It should be noted that narrative selves are not essentialist; it is entirely likely that, through various combinations of events, multiple narratives can be constructed about one single object, whether that object is a person, a brand, an event or a country (Boje, 2001). This results in the construction of various social realities and, by extension, identities.

One important aspect of identity, narrative and reality is that the construction and reconstruction flow can go in both directions. One direction of the flow is when identity uses a narrative to create reality, which allows others to be able to identify that identity (Aterianus-Owanga, 2015). On the other hand, individuals' identities can also be affected by their social reality (Horrocks & Callahan, 2006). Klein and Goethals (2002) examined how an individual's construction of social reality feeds back to that individual's self-concept or identity. In their study, they conducted two experiments with more than 300 participants to discover how they would react to information about what others can or will do. They found that 'people will change their beliefs about their own abilities after they are given realistic information about the abilities of others' (Klein & Goethals, 2002, p. 111). In other words, if a person's reality is changed by factors such as the interaction with other people's reality, the person's identity will change.

This is a particularly interesting notion about identity; it both echoes and highlights a concept of identity mentioned in consumer culture theory that was previously not considered significant. This is the idea of one identity impacting another. One reason that consumers choose to be part of a brand community is to be identified as part of that community (Habibi et al., 2014). This process is often treated as active engagement on the part of the consumer (Muniz & O'Guinn,

2001). However, social identity is reactive (Popescu, 2019). Within the conceptual framework of consumer stewards, ordinary consumers' social identity is created in reaction to consumer stewards' narrative identity (McCreery & Best, 2004). This places consumer stewards in an extremely interesting position of power and influence within the social hierarchy and creates theoretical curiosity within the consumer culture theory and consumer identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

2.1.2.5. Summary of Identity and Logic Links. In this section on identity, we discussed identity construction and reconstruction as the result of social interaction (Schneider, 1981). When researching consumer stewards, it is not enough to merely examine how their social identity is constructed and reconstructed. This is because their social identity is not entirely created reactively. Everyone creates their own identity and communicates it to the outside world through narrative (McCreery & Best, 2004). However, it is clear from the literature on consumer tribes (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012; Hemetsberger, 2008; Sigamoney, 2016) as well as the various ways consumer stewards express their social identities (Bates et al., 2020; Hongladarom, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008a) that consumer stewards' level of engagement in their identity management is beyond the level of the consumer norm and catapults their actions into the realm of personal branding (Young, 2009b).

In Section 2.1: Consumer Culture Theory and Identity Literature, consumer stewards' place within the existing literature was established. Consumer stewards are part of the consumer culture theory, in particular, the consumer identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Through an analysis of the existing literature on identity within the concept of consumer stewards, the emotional investment (Koetz & Tankersley, 2016) and the level of engagement as a result of that investment (Kates, 2002) can be seen to be significantly higher in consumer stewards in comparison to other consumers within the same community. This suggests that consumer stewards occupy an important and unique social position and position of power. Consumer stewards present an interesting approach to consumer culture theory because it is entirely possible that their consumption of a product/brand affects many other consumers. This impact is not merely on a purchasing level; it could potentially affect the identity of ordinary consumers (Klein & Goethals, 2002).

In Section 2.2: Identity, the focus is limited to the implications of consumer stewards' identity as stated within the existing literature and in what ways consumer stewards present a theoretical curiosity for the same literature. Three literature streams are considered. The first stream relates to Bourdieu's (1984) social theory. Consumer stewards represent a group of consumers who

occupy a unique social status that sets them apart from other consumers. This difference in social position and movement within the social hierarchy is one important aspect that makes the consumer steward an important figure within the community.

The second literature stream is on forms of power (French & Raven, 1959). Through the analysis of social identity, in particular, narrative identity (Klein & Goethals, 2002; McCreery & Best, 2004; Horrocks & Callahan, 2006), and consumer tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002), it was established that consumer stewards could influence others' identity. The word 'influence' suggests one has power over another. However, different forms of power operate differently (French & Raven, 1959). This implies that depending on which forms of power consumer stewards exercise, their roles and identity may change, since social identity is constructed through social interaction (D'Albergaria Freitas and de Almeida (2017).

The third stream is literature on media and communication (Jenkins, 2004b; Salles, 2015; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). The presence of consumer stewards and the specific behaviour and style of the subculture of consumption are easiest to identify within the online environment (Kozinets, 2002b). At the same time, the digital realm has its own rules and operations. Consumer stewards, being part of consumer culture, also operate within the digital environment and must behave accordingly. It is, therefore, important to analyse consumer stewards' presence in cyberspace while being guided by the existing literature on Bourdieu's social theory and power.

2.2. Three Streams of Existing Literature – Bourdieu, Power, and Media and Communication

2.2.1. Pierre Bourdieu's Social Theory

Bourdieu (1984) identified three forms of capital in social spaces: social, cultural and economic. It is through obtaining and utilising these types of capital that an ordinary consumer can become a consumer steward. Bourdieu's work on the conception of social and cultural capital is said to be 'beyond dispute' (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 568). The theory was the result of two competing ideologies at the time. On the one hand, there was the theory of structuralism, where the likes of Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that there were universal, rigid rules to all societies that provided the foundation for all social life (Rossi, 1973). On the other hand, postmodernists and existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre emphasised an individual, subjective outlook that can never be pinned down (Charlesworth, 1976). Bourdieu (1984) claimed that both perspectives are necessary and must work together. From this dual acknowledgement of social organisation and

the subjective positionalities of the individuals who comprise it, the concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital explain the opposition between individual and society' (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu stated that society is 'highly differentiated, consisting of a large number of fields full of power struggles' (Zhu, 2012, p. 89). This results in a social hierarchy where only those located at the top have the right to influence or dominate other social classes. Of course, this hierarchy is not unchangeable. Dominant classes can be added, removed or even replaced by a lower-level class. So, one can reach the top without being born into the dominant class, such as an ordinary consumer who, by definition, is located at the end of the product chain. According to Bourdieu (1984), this ascension to a higher social class is achieved through the acquisition of capital, whether it be social, cultural or economic (Trigg, 2004, pp. 404-405).

Bourdieu used the term habitus to explain the 'dispositions of individuals in the social structure' (1984, p. 170). An individual's disposition and perception of an event will be affected by the habitus in which that individual dwells. At the same time, Bourdieu used the concepts of field and capital to demonstrate how individuals and groups might change their own social class. 'The field is a multidimensional space of positions or locations in which a person's coordinates are determined by both the amount and composition of the types of "capital" that they possess' (Allen & Anderson, 1994, p. 70). In other words, since an individual's status is determined by the possession of various combinations and volumes of capital, to change or maintain one's social status, one must preserve the capital one already has.

The importance of both habitus and field cannot be underestimated. The combination of the two is what creates a 'lifestyle' unique to each individual (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101).

> [H]abitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170)

This concept of habitus and the creation of lifestyle is crucial to the interpretation of consumer stewards. It allowed this study to explore consumer stewards in terms of the accumulation of capitals while still focusing on their social identities. The link between habitus and social identity can be easily identified. It has been recorded that consumer stewards within a brand community will create their own consumer tribe (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012; Sigamoney, 2016). This tribe, like all other subcultures of consumption, has a shared and unique belief and behaviour style that sets it apart from the norm (Kozinets, 2001). Using Bourdieu's definition, it

can be stated that consumer stewards create their own habitus. Since the existing literature on social identity already established that the consumer tribe is the reality the consumer steward created through their narrative identity (McCreery & Best, 2004), it is safe to state that within the context of consumer stewards, habitus is the extension of consumer stewards' social identity.

This allows an analysis of consumer stewards' social identity (and, by extension, their social habitus) within the context of Bourdieu's social theory. Social habitus is created out of the struggle between economic and social conditions (capital volume and composition; Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). For example, when a consumer is about to decide whether or not to purchase a particular product, they base their decision on a variety of sociological elements that are determined by their habitus, including sex, class and gender. In other words, one of the effects of habitus is 'its ability to limit what is "thinkable" within that habitus' (Vaidya, 2019, p. 608). For example, a consumer tribe has its own belief system, and certain actions or behaviours that are accepted in other places are forbidden or unthinkable within that social context (Kozinets, 2001).

Field, on the other hand,

> functioning as a system of differences, differential deviations, [that] allow the most fundamental social differences to be expressed almost as completely as through the most complex and refined expressive systems available in the legitimate arts; and it can be seen that the total field of these fields offers well-nigh inexhaustible possibilities for the pursuit of distinction. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 226)

Lee et al. (2014, p. 317) stated that 'field is the structure of the social spaces where habitus is formed, capitals are distributed, and their values are determined'. Since field exists within a social space, it is created through social relationships and the expressions of these relationships. These social relationships are also relationships of distinction, and this distinction operates both in reality (how it is carried out and presented to people through the news and the show itself) and in people's minds (how it is perceived and appreciated (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 234)).

One way to interpret the concept of field within the context of consumer stewards is that if consumer stewards create their habitus, they must also establish the field, such as the structure and rules within their consumer tribe. Another way to interpret the concept of field is that consumer stewards must also follow certain rules established within the habitus they presently occupy. This is because consumer stewards are part of greater brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This places consumer stewards in a mitigated, management-like position within

the community, as according to our understanding of field (Bourdieu, 1984) and consumer stewards' social position (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012), they are both ruler and ruled. This made the label 'stewards' even more fitting to describe their social position.

According to Bourdieu, '(habitus)(capital) + field = practice' (1984, p. 101), meaning that an individuals' style (i.e. their identity) is created through a combination of social interactions, various combinations and volumes of capitals, and the rules they either created themselves or society (i.e. social hierarchy) force upon them. To link this concept back to consumer stewards, they create their habitus with their social identity and need to create a field within the social sphere they create, but they are also part of the large field of the brand community. However, in order to understand how consumer stewards function within the social hierarchy, it is also important to have a firm grasp of the types of capital. As stated at the beginning of this section, there are three forms of capital: social, cultural and economic (Bourdieu, 1984).

2.2.1.1. Economic Capital. Economic capital is about money, income and wealth. It is also known as the material dimension (Vlasic et al., 2012, p. 43). Of the three capitals, this material dimension requires the least amount of exploration, even though this research assumes it to be the personal end goal of consumer stewards because it considers consumer steward to be a profession (for payment) as well as a unique social position. In the earlier examples of consumer stewards (LaserBelch, 2019; Zepla, 2022a), content creation was their livelihood, created through their consumption and value co-creation.

This does not suggest that consumer stewards obtain but do not use economic capital. Those who possess high economic capital are able to influence people, consume goods of a higher market value and demonstrate their status through possessions associated with a higher level in the social hierarchy. For example, in 2019, the YouTuber Unbox Therapy posted a video simply titled *The ULTIMATE $30,000 Gaming PC Setup*, which received over 14 million views (Unbox Therapy, 2018). In this video, they demonstrated the money they spent setting up their gaming system (i.e. their economic capital), the sponsorship they received from a major gaming company (i.e. their social connections) and even a coke coker with the 'Unbox Therapy' logo printed on it (i.e. their popularity).

This display of wealth is not unknown in the literature on economic capital. Trigg stated that people with low social or cultural capital might try to identify themselves as being higher in the hierarchy of the social network using economic capital, while those at the top of the hierarchy do not do so (2004, p. 399). This illustrates that economic capital can be exchanged for other

forms of capital, an exchange that does not always lead to an elevation of one's social status, as one's understanding of class difference is bound by one's field and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984).

Economic capital is directly related to freedom and privilege. There are goods of necessity as well as goods that can be defined as the stylisation of life, and as one's economic capital increases, so do one's distance from the goods of necessity and closeness to the 'stylisation of life' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 120). For a consumer to differentiate from another consumer, consumption must be exercised beyond the sphere of necessity and into the realm of the stylisation of life. Again, this process is not to increase one's economic capital; rather, it is an exchange for other forms of capital. Ignatow and Robinson (2017) stated that the 'structure of the distribution of economic capital is symmetrical and opposite to that of cultural capital' (2017, p. 952). Put simply, an increase in cultural capital requires a reduction of economic capital.

2.2.1.2. Cultural Capital.

Bourdieu (1984, p. 250) stated that:

> Culture is a stake which, like all social stakes, simultaneously presupposes and demands that one take part in the game and be taken in by it; and interest in culture, without which there is no race, no competition, is produced by the very race and competition which it produces.

In simple terms, cultural capital is a 'more symbolic dimension of capital, which can be defined as the accumulated stock of knowledge about the products of artistic and intellectual traditions' (Trigg, 2004, p. 399). The product, such as online content, created by consumer stewards through their consumption process can be seen as their artistic expression of their consumption. In the example of VTubers, one reason for their popularity is the animated appeal they add to their online content (Liudmila, 2020).

Cultural capital can be separated into two types: (1) cultural capital through owning products (e.g. artwork) that hold cultural value and (2) knowledge/qualifications, such as educational capital, that allow the owner to generate cultural capital. Bourdieu viewed cultural capital and educational capital as separate entities, although there is a 'close relationship linking cultural practices (or the corresponding opinions) to educational capital (measured by qualifications)' (1984, p. 13). The exchange between cultural and educational capital is a common practice, e.g. owning a bookshelf full of books may suggest that the owner reads a lot (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 87). In the same way, it is commonly accepted that by increasing the level and spread of schooling, the mass of cultural product will increase (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 133). As Bourdieu stated in his example, by 'identifying culture with knowledge, they think that the cultivated man is one who

possesses an immense fund of knowledge and refuse to believe him when he professes' (1984, p. 330).

Following this train of thought, cultural capital is used to explain the class-based approach to the social hierarchy. Thus, cultural capital (and, by extension, educational capital) is directly linked to one's social position and class. In the previously mentioned study by Goldie (2006) on UK consumers, only 46% of users were confident in their ability to get the most out of their information technology (IT) product. This figure may be a mark of ignorance or a sign that educational capital allowed them to be a higher level of consumer compared to the remaining 54%. The figures themselves are not as important as the notion that the basic possession of educational capital is sufficient to create a disparity between consumers.

2.2.1.2.1. Cultural Product and Legitimacy. Due to the close association between cultural products and social classes, the former also contributes to class recognition and legitimacy. Bourdieu (1984, p. 231) stated:

A cultural product is a constituted taste, a taste which has been raised from the vague semi-existence of half-formulated or unformulated experience, implicit or even unconscious desire, to the full reality of the finished product, by a process of objectification which, in present circumstances, is almost always the work of professionals. It is consequently charged with the legitimizing, reinforcing capacity which objectification always possesses.

For example, classical music is associated with high-class members of society – in comparison to rock music, which is associated with middle- or lower-class members. This association carries a sense of legitimacy, which is determined by both popularity in and recognition from society (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 14). What is interesting about legitimacy is that the more legitimate a cultural product becomes, the more hierarchical a structure it tends to have (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 14). This can be seen in the education system, which has a very strict hierarchy of knowledge, for example, bachelor's, master's and PhD degrees (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 238). This ability to establish a class system is a defining trait that is common across all cultural products.

One should also note that a cultural product is more easily accepted and adopted if it does not create discord within the social class. As Bourdieu stated, 'we can hypothesize as a general law that a sport is more likely to be adopted by a social class if it does not contradict that class's relation to the body at its deepest and most unconscious level' (1984, pp. 217-218). Of course, even if a cultural product does create discord, one must realise that the dominant class does not actively counter its growth. In fact, the only thing the dominant class is required to do is adopt a dominant position. It is never in the interest of the producer of a new cultural product to distance

or self-isolate their creation from ‘the dominant class and its value’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 394) because the new product will be treated in a negative sense by default.

The closer a cultural product is to the dominant class, the more legitimacy it can infer. Likewise, the reverse is true. The legitimacy will be reduced the further away one is from the field one derives legitimate power from (ÜStÜNer & Thompson, 2013, p. 148), much like an artist has the legitimacy to give a lecture in art but not the qualification to deliver a class in rocket science.

It might seem contrary that cultural products demonstrate individuality while the legitimacy of the cultural products entails hierarchy and conformity. Yet, individuals do give up a certain amount of uniqueness and individuality in exchange for legitimacy. ‘The more legitimate a given area, the more necessary and “profitable” it is to be competent in it, and the more damaging and “costly” to be incompetent’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 86). In other words, freedom and control are reduced to receive a better conversion rate from cultural capital to economic capital.

2.2.1.3. Social Capital. Social capital is based on relationships and is defined as ‘a valuable asset that stems from access to resources made available through social relationships’ (Liping et al., 2018, p. 214). With regard to business, it is an ‘investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace’ (Bonanno, 2018, p. 386). Popularity can be considered a form of social capital (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In the many examples of consumer stewards mentioned in the section on social identity (e.g. LaserBelch, 2019; Zepla, 2022a), the reason these streamers are considered online celebrities is their popularity.

At its core, social capital is a resource, but its value is defined ‘on the basis of [an] existing and potential social network’ (Vlasic et al., 2012, p. 43). For example, an individual can form relationships with those who have high capital in money, influence or both, which can, in turn, give the individual influence within the social sphere (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017, p. 592). Granovetter (1973) described the concept of social relations as strong and weak ties. Strong ties are close relationships, such as family members, while weak ties are more casual connections, such as acquaintances. Granovetter (1973) argued that weak ties are particularly valuable for accessing new information and opportunities, while strong ties provide emotional support. Weak ties can be described as the social sphere surrounding an individual. Different individuals would have different social sphere, which would lead to access to different networks, resources, and information.

It has been said that social capital can serve as a ‘multiplier’ of other forms of capital (Bonanno, 2018, p. 386). This means that even if someone does not possess the expertise (i.e. education/culture capital), if they have great social capital, they are still persuasive. This notion

is important to consumer stewards because they seem to possess great amounts of social capital. According to a study on the popularity of online content by Van Dijck and Poell (2013), if we define popularity as the number of 'likes' or 'views' per video, then the higher the popularity, the more likely a platform will be to promote a video. This is programmed into the platform. This means that the popularity of content does not necessarily equal accurate information.

Based on the above example, in order to fully understand the nature of social capital, it is vital to look beyond pure economic value. While it is clear that social networks hold value, their value does not necessarily translate entirely into economic capital, although this is certainly possible because, as outlined in a previous section, streamers have been known to do fundraising (e.g. LaserBelch, 2019). Social capital is certainly capable of creating change in social behaviour. Gonzalez et al. (2004) examined the use of social capital within a learning environment. Their hypothesis was that social capital would be able to create a learning environment that would improve a student's learning. They showed that 'higher levels of social capital in a class produce more collaboration amongst students' (Gonzalez et al., 2004, p. 4).

Furthermore, social capital can create a collaborative process of resource integration, which evaluates the degree to which individuals are able to access other resources through their social network and the capacity to adapt and integrate these resources (Akaka et al., 2012). Following this train of thought, it can be argued that social capital improves an individual's 'capacit[y] to integrate, adapt and mobilize resources that, by its turn, maximize density and therefore value co-creation processes' (Alves & Edvardsson, 2019, p. 33). This identifies one important function of consumer stewards, that is, their capacity for value creation and, more specifically, value co-creation. Indeed, as Vargo and Lusch (2008) stated, no individual can create value in isolation, as there is a fundamental need for people to collaborate. This collaboration, through the use of a social network, can improve resource integration (Chandler & Wieland, 2010). Hence, social capital is seen as a resource that maximises collaborative advantage (Bourdieu, 1984).

Social capital is also a required precondition for the creation of opinion leaders, the position that consumer stewards occupy. The power of an opinion leader 'consists of influence exercised through strong relationships between weakly equivalent people' (Burt, 1999, p. 11). It should be emphasised that opinion leaders are not necessarily more authoritative or more attractive than other consumers; instead, they are defined by their function and position within a social network. This position of power within a social network can be explained through social capital. Individuals who are better connected are seen as being in possession of greater social capital. Burt's (1999) study on opinion leaders and social capital reflects the benefit of possessing such

significant social capital. They stated that opinion leaders (rich in social capital) could move information faster and to more people. In addition, they are highly mobile relative to bureaucracy, easily shifting resources within the network, thus saving time and energy when switching from one solution to another. (pp. 15–16)

In summary, the possession of social capital allows consumer stewards to supplement their deficiency in other capitals (Bonanno, 2018), create collaboration (Gonzalez et al., 2004) and develop value co-creation (Alves & Edvardsson, 2019) processes within their social sphere. It allows them to position themselves as a leader inside their social tribe (Burt, 1999).

2.2.1.4. Social Trajectory. With field, habitus and the three capitals outlined and the role/place of consumer stewards in each identified, it is possible to consider consumer stewards' practices within the social hierarchy. This is instrumental because the notion of consumer stewards highlights a special group of consumers that is capable of influencing others' consumption through their own consumption. The existing literature on consumer tribes already suggested a change in social status, for example, taking up the role of opinion leader (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012; Hemetsberger, 2008; Sigamoney, 2016). Thus, it is necessary to consider how the components work together to define the social class of consumer stewards and in what way the effect changes their position within the social hierarchy.

Bourdieu (1984, p. 101) described that habitus and these various types of capital define the social position of the individual. If so, then a change in any of these capitals would lead to a change in social trajectory. The term trajectory is used because it defines what an individual's movement will be within the social class before and after a change (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 124). This means that individuals have the opportunity to change their habitus and/or field. However, 'individuals do not move about in social space in a random way, partly because they are subject to the forces which structure this space' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 344). This social trajectory within the social space allows for two types of movement: vertical movement (the most frequent), where the individual rises or falls within a class, and transverse movement, where the individual moves into a different class (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 110).

For an ordinary consumer to become a consumer steward, a vertical movement will serve to distinguish them from the rest of the consumer community. At the same time, to be considered members of the dominant class, consumer stewards must also exhibit transverse movement. Only then can consumer stewards be classified as a distinct class of their own. Indeed, changing individuals' social trajectory is always an attempt to 'distinguish themselves from the group

immediately below (or believed to be so)' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 132). This is a process of reconstruction of their social identity, for as Bourdieu (1984, p. 112) stated, 'social identity is defined and asserted through difference'.

2.2.1.4.1. Consumer Stewards as a Dominant Class. Consumer stewards' vertical movement has already been established through the discussion of social capital and how their cultural and economic capitals are enhanced as a result (Bonanno, 2018). The transverse movement has already been hinted at through the existing literature on consumer tribes (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012, p. 421) and narrative identity (McCreery & Best, 2004). However, there is a difference between being a leader/organiser and being a distinct class (i.e. in a dominant social position). Thus, this social position needs to be highlighted, as it identifies the status of consumer stewards within the social hierarchy.

According to Abercrombie and Turner (1978), a sign of a dominant class is that the thoughts of the dominated classes operate within the belief system provided by the dominant class. On the surface, consumer stewards seem to fit the definition of a dominant class. Through their narrative identity (McCreery & Best, 2004), they are able to create habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1984) where they are the dominant figure. However, it is important to remember that consumer stewards are part of consumer culture and function within a brand community (Canniford, 2011), where the brand owner is the legitimate dominant class. This means consumer stewards are part of the dominant and subordinate classes.

A sign of subordinate classes is that they sometimes do not believe/share/accept the dominant ideology and will rebel or protest (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978, p. 154, 1978, p. 154). One example of this rebellion can be seen in a YouTube video made by a brand community (*Yu-Gi-Oh Trading Card Game*) content creator 'Cimooooooooo'. In 2019, they made a video about Konami (the brand owner of *Yu-Gi-Oh*) not inviting them to participate in a world championship, while many similar subscriber-sized YouTube content creators were invited (Cimooooooooo, 2019). Cimooooooooo currently has 305 thousand subscribers, and this video received 16 thousand likes and more than 3 thousand comments. Cimooooooooo claimed they were banned because of their criticism of Konami's product and disagreed with their marketing or product choices. Regardless of whether Cimooooooooo's claim is accurate, based on their actions and the followers, it is clear that they are a consumer steward (a leader of their consumer tribe) and display behaviours associated with the subordinate class.

In Section 2.1: Consumer Culture Theory and Identity Literature, which looked at consumer stewards' social identity, it was argued that consumer stewards' social identities are both reactive

and active. This notion can be translated to consumer stewards' subordinate and dominant class statuses. In this sense, this position is similar to the Kingship described by Abercrombie and Turner (1978). A king's position is above society and answers to God, that is, 'serve to legitimate kingship to the subordinate class, but in practice the main significance of the debate over the nature of kingship was to establish a relationship between barons and the king' (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978, p. 155). In the context of consumer stewards, the brand owner is the omnipotent figure, consumer stewards are the king, and the followers are either barons or peasantry, depending on how much support they give to the king. This places consumer stewards in the middle, between brand owners and other consumers. This means that, first, consumer stewards are a different class and have made a transverse movement (Bourdieu, 1984), and, second, this class always has to manage an important social tight rope between the favour of the brand owner and the need to appeal to the community (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978), else consumer stewards risk losing their status.

2.2.1.5. Summary and Logic Links. Bourdieu's social theory allows us to extract two key conceptual frameworks. First, consumer stewards' social position is determined by the field and habitus they occupy and the combination of various volumes and forms of capitals they possess (Bourdieu, 1984). Social capital is the type of capital consumer stewards possess the most of, and it serves as a multiplier (Bonanno, 2018) of their other capitals. Second, through changing their social trajectory, consumer stewards exhibit both vertical (Costa e. Silva & Carnido dos Santos, 2012) and transverse (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978) movements. This enables them to create a distinct class that sets them apart from brand owners and the community. It is a delicate social position, as consumer stewards act as an intermediary class between the dominant (brand owner) and the truly subordinate (ordinary consumers) class.

Consumer stewards' social position hints at a curious position of power. It is clearly not that of a brand owner, yet it logically should be greater than that of an ordinary consumer. However, one must not forget that consumer stewards are still consumers. Therefore, in the next section, this thesis will be asking, 'What power can consumers possibly possess?' and 'Is this power sufficient to challenge the dominant class?' In the case of consumer communities, the dominant class is often the commercial interest or brand owner. Following this logic, the next section will consider the notion of consumer power and, by extension, consumer stewards' power and influence.

2.2.2. Power and Consumers

Bourdieu's social theory describes how an individual, such as a consumer, obtains a position of influence. In the context of this study, what influence can consumer stewards potentially obtain? In the section on Bourdieu's social theory, the interesting social position consumer stewards occupy within the social hierarchy was highlighted. One important notion is that consumer stewards are still consumers. Therefore, it would be wrong to assume they possess the power of the dominant class, even though this is not to suggest they do not possess it. It makes sense to approach an investigation of power by examining consumer stewards' journeys from the subordinate class to the dominant class, as consumer stewards ascend from the consumer group. Hence, the purpose of this section is to use the existing literature on power to (1) outline what is possible for the role of the consumer and (2) demonstrate how consumers (more specifically, consumer stewards) in a position of influence exercise their power.

2.2.2.1. Forms of Power. When considering the literature on power, it is almost impossible not to go back to the notable studies of French and Raven (1959) and Raven (1965). French and Raven (1959, p. 260) first identified five bases of power: legitimate, reward, expert, referent and coercive. Several years later, Raven (1965) added a sixth power base: informational. These power bases are the cornerstones when analysing power, for 'power' is the influence of one's psychology, which includes one's 'behavior, opinions, attitudes, goals, needs, values, and all other aspects the person's psychological field' (French & Raven, 1959, p. 260).

a) Legitimate power is the belief instiled within someone that another person has a 'legitimate right' to influence (French & Raven, 1959, p. 153). For example, a brand owner has legitimate power over their product, such as how to market it and what price to set.
b) Reward power is based on the ability to reward someone for their compliance. For example, a brand owner can hire agents to become marketers, using money or similar rewards.
c) Coercive power is the opposite of reward power; instead of rewarding someone for compliance, it punishes them for noncompliance. A brand owner can sue a person who actively pirates a movie or sells or distributes it without the brand owner's consent.
d) Referent power has to do with the attractiveness of someone, such as the popularity of a movie star or gaming brand, which makes people (known as fans) follow them.

e) Expertise power is based on a person's skill and experience. For example, if a customer knows a lot about a product, they have the expertise to influence other consumers' behaviours.
f) Informational power is based on a person's ability to control information. For instance, if a consumer has the inside scoop on a product, they can use that to benefit themself.

All six bases of power are relevant to understanding the relationship between consumers and consumer stewards. At this point, we must re-emphasise that the current study focuses on the modern consumer. The reason for this emphasis is that in modern times, through the advent of the digital space, there has been a major change in the nature of consumer agency, resulting in a new domain for the exertion of power and influence and community formation. Therefore, it is important to contrast the old economy with the modern one to both understand and appreciate the power of the modern consumer.

2.2.2.2. The Old Economy. In the pre-digital economy, consumer agency was less pronounced and more weakly positioned in the balance of power. This contrasts with the current environment, where consumer agency is about the ability to influence marketing with an established legitimacy relative to the particular product (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). In the pre-digital economy, legitimate power was almost solely the domain of commercial interests. Rezabakhsh et al. (2006) described how, before the age of industrialisation, households relied on either self-produced products or local specialists, such as craftsmen and butchers. As such, consumers had great legitimate power because they had a 'personal and long-term relationship with "their" suppliers' and 'actively took part in the value chain' (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006, p. 11). This changed when industrialisation introduced a social difference between the business and the consumer. The business could set the price, the number of sales and the operations of the business, while the consumer could only accept or refuse the service or product on offer. This passive role meant that consumers lacked the ability to establish a legitimate power that could influence the market (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006).

When considering this situation in the context of French and Raven's identification of power bases, it is easy to image how businesses possessed both reward and coercive powers over consumers. The manipulation of price, limited rewards for loyal customers (such as customer loyalty programs today [Parsons, 2016]) and barriers (either or both physical or psychological) to brand switching underpinned this economy. Rezabakhsh et al. (2006, p. 6) termed this reverse use of reward and coercive power 'sanction power', which is 'a means of disciplining the firms'

behaviour and thus avoiding the disregard of consumer interests'. This term originated from a study by Hirschman (1970), where consumers positively demonstrated *loyalty* for acceptable workplace practices and exercised negative sanction through *exit* and *voice*. In theory, the consumer can act as a sovereign to steer business actions through sanction power (Hansen & Schrader, 1997). For example, when a consumer is dissatisfied with a brand, they can switch to a different brand (i.e. exit). This micro-level movement can potentially spark a macro-level movement from other consumers, which may 'jointly affect a product's or company's overall sales' (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006, p. 10).

However, as Hirschman (1970) pointed out, exit might not be possible if a monopoly exists within the market. Similarly, for a consumer to voice their complaint depends on (1) their willingness to do so and (2) the mechanism built into the system that allows complaints to be communicated 'cheaply and effectively' (Hirschman, 1970, p. 43). This built-in mechanism affects two types of communications – business-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer (Parsons, 2016). If a business is only able to communicate to consumers in public, while consumers can only communicate with a business in private, then the only message other consumers hear is a positive spin from the company (Pitt et al., 2002). By the same token, if the communication between the consumer and business is private, then there is no communication between consumers, thus limiting the available information for decision-making (Salles, 2015).

Referent power is even less of a factor when considering the power position between a business and a consumer in the old economy. Indeed, when analysing power shifts between the old and the new economy, researchers often omitted referent power altogether. As Rezabakhsh et al. (2006, p. 6) stated, a 'consumer can hardly be the model of identification for a company'. In an environment where the only referent power is a salesman's relationship with the consumer (Taylor & Woodside, 1982), it is difficult to see this role being reversed or altered on the part of the consumer. This can be attributed to the interaction and relationship between the consumer and the brand owner. Just like in the discussion on sanction power, if the market is small, the consumer's ability to exit from one brand to another is reduced because, without the intervention of the internet, there is limited interconnection and competition within the existing network (Jahn & Prüfer, 2008).

In regard to expert and informational power, consumers were also in a low power position in the old economy. According to Rezabakhsh et al. (2006):

> Consumers often lack the ability and/or the motivation to see through the biased information policy of companies, and consequently tend to rely on the firm's statements,

> regarding the firm as the expert. As consumers lack a wide-reaching network for information exchange, they are mostly unable to share their (positive and especially negative) consumption experiences with one another. As a result, the knowledge of experienced buyers hardly reaches inexperienced customers. (p. 8)

Murphy (2000) highlighted that information, as the adage goes, is power. When you 'know something, you have the ability to make a better choice' (p. 2). Indeed, where insufficient information is provided, decisions can only be made based on instinct, intuition and emotions, which can be misguided (Kahneman, 2013).

In the old economy, expert and informational power were 'usually characterized by a lack of transparency and information asymmetry between consumers and companies' (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006, p. 6). Siguaw et al. (2014) defined it as 'one channel member controlling whether information is shared with the other party, being able to explicate information or contingencies not previously available to the other channel member, and the source channel member is able to demonstrate the logic of suggested actions with this information'. (p. 10)

When examining the supply chain, information was often scarce, even between businesses and intermediaries (e.g. retailers). As Frazier et al. (2009) remarked, distributors 'possess information that is difficult, if not impossible, for suppliers to obtain' (p. 31).

2.2.2.3. The New Economy. The new economy is marked by the boom in ICT. With the introduction of the internet and digital media, scholars have argued that the power imbalance is shifting in favour of consumers, moving away from brand owners (Bakos, 1991; Seo, 2013). By improving the quantity as well as the quality of available information, the internet is able to enhance the power of consumers (Roland & Richard, 1994). Shipman (2001) termed this shift in power 'consumer sovereignty'. Murphy (2000, p. 1) stated that '[w]e're witnessing the greatest transition of power in history, one that will take power away from the mightiest corporations and social institutions and give it to [...] consumers'. With this in mind, we can look at the change to the power position between the consumer and brand owner for each power base individually.

2.2.2.3.1. Sanction Power Revisited. Reward and coercive power, that is, sanction power, have taken on many forms in the new economy. The goal of sanction power is to 'reinforce specific actions from the target' (Chae et al., 2017, p. 44), and there are two approaches the modern consumer is able to adopt to exercise such power: consumer-to-business and consumer-to-consumer. It is important at this point to re-state the social position

of consumer stewards, which is between the brand owner and other consumers. As such, sanction power is where one starts to see consumer stewards' power emerging.

In a consumer-to-business power play, sanction power generally means either exit or voice (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). With regard to exit, ICT brought forth the concept of e-commerce, which provides the consumer with the convenience of online shopping and, most importantly, choice (Parsons, 2016). This allows consumers to purchase from whomever they like and switch to another brand or service at the slightest sign of dissatisfaction (Rha et al., 2002). With regard to voice, the consumer's voice has been empowered by the invention of ICT (Dellarocas, 2003). As Rha et al. (2002) pointed out, consumers now have the ability to communicate their dissatisfaction, not only to the business but also to other consumers. This ability of consumer-to-consumer communication is what creates risk or causes damage to brand owners when they dissatisfy a customer (Stauss, 2000). One example of consumer-to-business communication that was expressed in the form of sanction power was during the launch of a remastered classic PC game, *Warcraft 3*, by Blizzard in 2020. This game was falsely advertised. The community was promised a game of a much higher quality than the launched version, which created a general feeling of betrayal. As a result of this and many other technical and PR problems, the community made efforts to ensure that the game had the worst rating on gaming websites through 'review bombing' and even went so far as giving higher ratings to other low-ranked titles in order to bottom out the particular title (YongYea, 2020). This demonstrates the damage brand owners risk when underestimating consumer sanction power. Of course, it must be pointed out that such actions also depend on 'individual consumers' motivation and willingness to become active' (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006, p. 16).

One such example of consumer-to-consumer communication that was expressed in the form of sanction power can be seen in Tsai's (2007) study. Tsai (2007, p. 32) described a case where one consumer who gave a negative and one-off review created a massive domino effect. In this case, the consumer wrote a blog about their poor experience with Dell, an established and well-known computer brand. Unbeknownst to the consumer at the time, they 'ignited what was apparently a popular sentiment', and 'hundreds of consumers hopped on the bandwagon, fervently expressing similar experiences … sending the computer manufacturer's reputation on a downward spiral' (Tsai, 2007, p. 32). In this sense, consumer-to-consumer communication brings transparency. It should also be highlighted that the consumer in this case was not a consumer steward but an ordinary consumer who was simply dissatisfied with Dell's service. Thus, they did not have the

social capital associated with consumer stewards. It is not difficult to imagine what would have happened if this negative review had been given by an opinion leader (i.e. consumer steward)

2.2.2.3.2. Legitimate Power Revisited. The notion of legitimacy was raised in the early literature on consumer stewards. Through the production of cultural products (ÜStÜNer & Thompson, 2013) and the accumulation of massive social capital (e.g. popularity; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), consumer stewards assert themselves as a part of the dominant classes (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978). If this assertion is correct, and consumer stewards indeed have legitimacy, they must also possess legitimate power.

Legitimate power among consumers (and, by extension, consumer stewards) reveals itself in two ways: price and product features. Vargo and Lusch (2008) identified the paradigm of service-dominant logic by examining the consumers' role in the value co-creation process with the brand owner. This concept is based on the notion that 'circumstances can be improved for all involved parties when organizations use their own resources and the resources of others (including consumers) to improve the overall experience' (Siguaw et al., 2014, p. 8). This had a huge effect on how consumers were perceived by the brand owner. In particular, the brand owner started to view the buyers' requests as a natural part of the buyer–supplier relationship (Zhao et al., 2008b). The end result is that 'for many customers, the Net will bring the freedom of the price-maker, rather than the previously entrenched servitude of the price-taker' (Pitt et al., 2002, p. 45). In addition, this new buyer–supplier relationship provides levels of personalisation of product features. For example, certain brands will provide product customisation before purchase, making each product unique to the consumer's tastes.

2.2.2.3.3. Referent Power Revisited. It has been established that consumer stewards are the possessors of great amounts of social capital (e.g. LaserBelch, 2019) and that social capital allows one to influence the status quo (Bourdieu, 1984). Concepts such as attractiveness and popularity are regarded as part of one's social capital (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). This is considered the halo effect, where consumer stewards are lauded merely because their followers like them (Kahneman, 2013), making referent power the outward expression of consumers' (and, by extension, consumer stewards') social capital.

The modern-day referent power between consumer and brand owner is interesting because there is a fundamental shift in perspective. The reason that referent power was rarely considered in the old economy is that consumers' attractiveness could rarely influence either the price or the production of the brand owner (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). The key feature of the digital economy is that many consumers have the opportunity to be influential and gain status (i.e. consumer

stewards). The key word is ‘gain’, meaning it is something that individual consumers have to work at to be in sufficient possession of. The example of a consumer of Dell being able to spark a huge outburst with a single negative review is a clear demonstration of an ordinary consumer turning into someone extraordinary (Tsai, 2007).

It is easy to demonstrate that a popular person has referent power to influence the might of a brand owner. Therefore, the focus should not be on how referent power influences people but rather on the impact that power has on the utiliser of referent power. Indeed, referent power derived from social capital is something consumer stewards make a living off (i.e. economic capital). For example, online content creator PewDiePie was able to use the massive referent power derived from their 39 million subscribers to generate $7 million from their videos and endorsements in 2014 (Luscombe, 2015). However, economic capital is merely a fraction of what referent power could bring. Paish (2018) listed 18 entrepreneurs who built their brands on their YouTube channels’ popularity. From gamer and make-up artist to business professional and travel adviser, there were two important take-aways from their back-stories. First, they were all successful in establishing social identities that were both unique (i.e. stood out) and similar (i.e. could be related to by their followers). Second, by exercising referent power, they were able to shift their social position (both vertical and transverse moment) and establish their legitimacy as a dominant class in their respective fields (Paish, 2018).

2.2.2.3.4. Expert Power Revisited. In Paish (2018) article, those 18 YouTube entrepreneurs did not achieve their new social status solely on personality and the halo effect (Kahneman, 2013); many built their reputations on their expertise. They were not necessarily the best in their respective fields; however, social capital has a multiplier effect (Bonanno, 2018), which made it easier for them to establish themselves as experts. Regardless of the level of difficulty, the use of expert power is an important way for consumer stewards to establish their social position.

A key way for consumer stewards to use expert power is to communicate with other consumers as consumers. Adjei et al. (2013) stated that ‘C2C communication is more powerful when the recipient believes that the source of information is experienced rather than a relative novice on the subject of that particular product’ (p. 18). Tsai (2007) described several similar cases, such as that of Marsha Collier, the author of eBay for Dummies, who sold a million copies of their book. As Tsai (2007, p. 32) remarked, ‘[s]ome users can’t be bought, Marsha Collier … refuses to be paid by the company because she wants to retain the freedom to criticize’. Tsai (2007)

quoted Marsha: ‘Products, I can choose to align with,’ she says. ‘The core [eBay, Amazon] is where I do business and I have to be blunt [and] honest’ (p. 32).

This not only demonstrates the power Marsha has (as a consumer) but also what brand they can legitimately represent (i.e. the brand of a consumer steward). Another similar case described by Tsai (2007) is that of Birdie Jaworshi, who committed themself to the beauty product brand Avon and, through their blog, amassed a ‘solid fan base, and many readers contributed comments’ (Tsai, 2007, p. 32). In this case, the brand owner did not respond to the elevated status of Jaworshi while they were still working for the company. As a result, when Jaworshi left, Avon missed an opportunity, as ‘the company … could have adopted the voice of the people for its own purposes – at very little cost’ (Tsai, 2007, p. 32).

2.2.2.3.5. Informational Power Revisited. If exercising expert power establishes a difference in social position between consumer stewards and other consumers, using informational power can be seen as changing the power position between consumer stewards and brand owners. In Siguaw et al. (2014) study on informational power, they suggested that there is not only a change in the power balance between brand owner and consumer but also a shift in the informational power balance between brand owner and intermediary. For example, by creating another information channel on a brand/product (i.e. from consumer stewards to other consumers), a brand owner or any of its subsidiaries no longer has ‘formal or authoritative control in the relationship’ (Siguaw et al., 2014, p. 11).

The more active members of a consumer group, for example, consumer stewards, become the new intermediaries in the relationship between consumers and brand owners. When a brand owner wishes to improve a product, it is consumer stewards who are eager to provide improvement ideas. This allows new products or services to be developed and even improve the original product and services, which can create new market opportunities (Ngo & O'Cass, 2009). Similarly, when a consumer has concerns about a product, that consumer’s feedback becomes a valuable source of trustworthy information, and that feedback is created by the more active members of the community – consumer stewards, for instance (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006).

2.2.2.4. Shifting Power Position and Negotiation of Power. An examination of some important aspects of the old and new economies in the context of this study demonstrated that there had been a shift in power from the brand owner to the consumer, mediated through IT, which can be seen to have increased the opportunity for consumers to be heard and influence the market. Consumer stewards can be seen as the main beneficiary of this shift. However, while an earlier paragraph focused on the power consumer stewards can possess and

the new social status they may achieve (e.g. Paish, 2018; Pitt et al., 2002; Siguaw et al., 2014), this is not a simple case of competition with the brand owner; rather, it involves accommodation and cooperation.

Modern-day consumers, and especially consumer stewards, are not the enemy of brand owners. Indeed, there is a process of negotiation of power between brand owners and consumer stewards. In the case of Dell's dissatisfied consumer, Dell had the option to disregard the negative comment. However, the head of the company stated that in the modern information world, many consumers like to share their experiences, and it is to a company's advantage to face those comments and criticisms head-on and take responsibility (Tsai, 2007, p. 32). This is why Dell openly communicated with their consumers through public forums and blogs, which contributed to its subsequent 'improved press and higher earnings' (Tsai, 2007, p. 32).

Such examples suggest a change in the operating model. Instead of the brand owner competing with consumers for power, 'a company should proactively seek out their view[s]' (Tsai, 2007, p. 32). In a documentary by Iwerks (2019) on one of the giants of eSports gaming, *League of Legends* (LoL), and its origin, the highlighted reason for the success of the game was the willingness of the brand owner, Riot Games, to communicate with their consumers – much to the chagrin of their business partners. In 2010, when the company first launched the game in France, the brand owner made a partnership deal with a local company. However, one weekend, the server broke down, and the issues could not be fixed because the brand owner was unable to reach the partner company. At the same time, the user forum was filled with comments such as 'SERIOUSLY hurting Riot's reputation', 'months of bugs, crashes' and 'Please Riot, please. Takes these issues seriously'. In fact, due to the irresponsible stance of the partner, no spokesman was present for hours, which exacerbated the issues even further, leading to comments such as '1hr Servers Busy, 3h 30 min queue, And Riot says nothing? Are they working?', 'RIOT PLS', 'Your worst move yet, Riot.', 'Too bad. This was such a great game. Guess I'm not playing' and 'R.I.P Euro LoL'. This caused Riot Games to pull out of the partnership and build a server within three days to host the game. Needless to say, they succeeded in this task, which improved their brand image (Iwerks, 2019). Chae et al. (2017, p. 39) termed this effect the result of 'nonmediated power', which appears when expert, legitimate and referent power allow consumers and brand owners direct communication, bypassing intermediary agents altogether.

When examining the market in the new economy, many companies actively promote consumer engagement to create a win–win situation. Bhargava and Chakravarti (2009) looked at the effects of priming power on the appeal of socially responsible products. Priming means when expose to

one stimulus, it would trigger another response associated with another stimulus. They stated that how consumers perceive a brand's motivation matters and is reflected in their attitude towards the brand. Indeed, there 'is a general assumption that consumers will reward firms for their support of social programs and this has led many firms to adopt social causes' (Bhargava & Chakravarti, 2009, p. 831). In the study, Bhargava and Chakravarti (2009) paired a brand with consumer-empowered messages, such as 'You Can Make a Difference. We can help' instead of 'We Can Make a Difference. You can help'. The result showed a 'significantly enhanced purchase likelihood in the consumer empowered frame … enhanced overall opinion for the brand in the message that places consumers in the position of power' (Bhargava & Chakravarti, 2009, p. 832).

2.2.2.5. Intention to Exercise Power: The Theory of Planned Behaviour.

Throughout this section, it is evident that the modern consumer can use many forms of power (Paish, 2018; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Siguaw et al., 2014; Tsai, 2007), and brand owners would be wise to understand and respect those powers (Bhargava & Chakravarti, 2009; Iwerks, 2019). However, although these forms of power can theoretically be used by any/all modern consumers, it must be emphasised that, in reality, most people accept the status quo. In other words, consumer power will only have meaning if there are consumers who will exercise it, regardless of whether the reason behind it is for themselves or for the good of the consumer group as a whole.

Therefore, one must differentiate between consumers who accept the status quo and those who do not. This difference can be summarised as intention, which can be explained using the theory of planned behaviour. Ajzen (1991) defined the theory of planned behaviour as 'the individual's *intention* to perform a given behaviour' (p. 181). It is used to analyse, explain and predict human behaviour. For example, Martensen and Mouritsen (2016) used the theory of planned behaviour to hypothesise the link between attitude towards a brand and intent to purchase. Similarly, Shaw et al. (2005) incorporated this theory as part of their study on consumers' ethical decision-making by linking it to self-identity. They stated that because ethics are part of a consumer's self-identity, they cause them to make ethical purchasing decisions (Shaw et al., 2005, p. 190).

In the first part of the literature review, it was theorised that consumer stewards actively engage with the brand, the brand owner and the brand community (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Cova & Cova, 2002) through a process of brand management of their self-identity (McCreery & Best, 2004; Schneider, 1981). This behaviour is labelled as engagement. The word engagement is just another word to describe intentional behaviour, as the social identities of consumer stewards are

the result of voluntary rather than involuntary actions. This means that one can predict another's intended behaviour by understanding that person's intention.

Indeed, one can predict an individual's level of engagement in a specific topic by applying the theory of planned behaviour and understanding the behaviour intention (Miller & Howell, 2005). Miller and Howell (2005) broke behaviour intention into five aspects:

- Attitude towards behaviour (e.g. belief and personal opinion)
- Subject norms (opinion of peers)
- Social norms (society's opinion)
- Perceived power (external powers that can help or hinder the execution of the intent)
- Perceived behaviour control (individual's internal power to perform or stop a behaviour)

These five aspects that constitute behaviour intention demonstrate that to understand a consumer steward's engagement (or behaviour intent) to exercise a particular form of power, it is important to understand the psychology of the individual as well as other external factors that may assist or deny the execution of their intent.

2.2.2.6. Summary and Logic Links. The idea of consumer stewards assumes a position of power for these unique consumers. The phrase 'position of power' has a double meaning: (1) it is a position that has power, and (2) one must exercise power in order to gain that position. Bourdieu's conceptual framework (see Section 2.2.1: Pierre Bourdieu's Social Theory) shows that one can obtain a position of power through the exchange of capital (Bourdieu, 1984). This section demonstrated how consumer stewards exercise such influence. More importantly, the existing literature showed that the use of different forms of influence/power had caused a shift in consumer stewards' social position (Paish, 2018; Pitt et al., 2002; Siguaw et al., 2014). This was not a process of cause and effect but rather one of exchange. However, the existing literature does not clearly define how this exchange was achieved. An exchange has clearly taken place, and the existing literature suggested an exchange between social capital and referent power (Bourdieu, 1984; Kahneman, 2013; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), yet social capital is clearly not the only capital consumer stewards possess (Paish, 2018; Unbox Therapy, 2018), and neither is referent power the only power they can exercise (Pitt et al., 2002; Siguaw et al., 2014; Tsai, 2007). Therefore, the existing literature described the social position and the social interactions of consumer stewards in a general manner but lacked an explanation for how capitals and powers feed back to each other.

This is an important issue because consumer stewards represent a unique consumption process, which forms their unique consumer identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). They are different from ordinary consumers, despite the 'role of consumer' still being part of their identity. An ordinary consumer can use money (i.e. economic capital) to watch a newly released movie (i.e. consume a cultural product) and thus possess the knowledge to talk about the movie (i.e. informational and expert power). However, this process can only reaffirm their social position (Bourdieu, 1984), not improve it. In comparison, consumer stewards may perform the exact same actions and thereby increase their capitals and social status. Therefore, we argue that additional capital or force is introduced as part of consumer stewards' consumption circle, which the existing literature did not identify.

Another issue raised from the existing literature on power is the brand owners' negotiation of power with consumers, especially consumer stewards, and that the exercise or negotiation of power requires intended behaviour on the part of consumer stewards. This highlights the interesting position between brand owners and consumers stewards, as consumer stewards have been both critics of brand owners' products (Cimooooooooo, 2019) and valuable collaborators for them (Unbox Therapy, 2018). It also highlights the importance of engagement with consumer stewards and that such engagement is more than just the will/belief/opinion of an individual. Instead, behaviour intention is composed of complex factors, both internal and external (e.g. Miller & Howell, 2005).

In Section 2.2.3: Consumers and Media, the existing literature on media is used to further examine this notion of the negotiation of power between consumer stewards and brand owners. Since consumer stewards are most noticeable in an online environment (Kozinets, 2002b; Muñiz & Schau, 2005), a detailed analysis of the impact of ICT on consumers (and, by extension, consumer stewards) facilitates a better understanding of the relationship between brand owners, consumer stewards and ordinary consumers.

2.2.3. Consumers and Media

The purpose of this section is to analyse the concept of consumer stewards and their interactions with brand owners and their followers by examining ICT. As McLuchan (1995, p. 237) stated, 'Medium itself is the message'. Consumer stewards are most identifiable in the online environment (Kozinets, 2002b; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), that is, ICT. Both interactions with other consumers and the negotiation of power with brand owners are achieved through ICT. As such, technology is more than the carrier of communication; rather, it is the communication itself (McLuhan, 1995).

To analyse the impact of ICT and how it affects the current understanding of social theory and power within the concept of consumer stewards, this section is divided into two parts. The first part looks at consumers and media in general, with a particular focus on the negotiation of power between consumer stewards and brand owners. The second part looks at a specific breed of consumers, eSports consumer stewards, who are intimately connected to ICT, as the entire community is almost exclusively located in the digital environment. By analysing this consumer community and consumer stewards within this community, it will provide thesis a community of convenience to apply its conceptual framework.

2.2.3.1. Information and Communication Technology as a Message for Consumer Stewards.

The modern consumer differs from the traditional one in terms of the effect media/ICT has on their behaviours. Technology has no predetermined or unchanging purpose. Instead, it is constantly defined and redefined by its users (Salles, 2015). This begs the question, 'Who are the users?' The most common answer is that the users are consumers, which is why many have argued that media IT empowers people (Bates et al., 2020; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). However, consumers are not the only users, since brand owners, companies and corporations, engineers, and programmers also engage with the technology. These people are part of a dominant class and are predisposed to define the legitimate purpose of a technology's use. As such, the deployment of any new media results in a struggle to become the dominant user(s) between the brand owners and consumers. The difference between the modern and traditional consumer is that the modern consumer's right (or power) to participate as a visible and influential entity is facilitated through the medium of IT.

To explore this negotiation of power, with a particular focus on the consumer side, we employed the work of Van Dijck and Poell (2013) on social media logic, which sought a balanced approach between the overpowering presence of technology and the human element. In particular, this research will examine the first three elements or tools: programmability, popularity and connectivity. These three elements are central to a consumer's struggle to be the dominant user and create the foundation for the emergence of consumer stewards.

2.2.3.1.1. Programmability.

Programmability can be defined as 'the ability of a social media platform to trigger and steer users' creative or communicative contributions, while users, through their interaction with these coded environments, may in turn influence the flow of communication and information activated by such a platform'. (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5)

This definition can be interpreted in two stages, the first concerns computer code, data and algorithms. The creators/writers of the platforms predefine the meaning and use of the technology (Salles, 2015). To the public, they are the engineers of technology (including companies and enterprises) who build the rules and shape of the algorithm, and it is these algorithms that steer the user experience (Beer, 2009).

However, engineers can only establish the rudimentary structures, as the end stage of IT is defined by its users (Salles, 2015). For this reason, the second stage of programmability's definition has to do with human agency. The human agency, or the 'user', must not be thought of as referring to everyone. Rather, it relates to those who are part of the influential social class (e.g. brand owners and investors) and capable of programming on the human level. This type of 'programming' refers to an 'editorial strategy that manifests itself through the selection, juxtaposition, and promotion of certain items in the flow of scheduled content' (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 6). For example, YouTube presents users with random videos that they may never have searched for or even thought of. These YouTube videos may seem random, but behind the algorithms is a conscious method designed to engage new audiences. Whether consciously aware of it or not, these seemingly 'random' videos shape the experience and preference of the user by introducing new content that benefits the producer through exposure.

2.2.3.1.2. Popularity. If we consider programmability to be a tool to assert influence through the use of media IT, the logical question becomes, 'How can consumers, as end users, obtain influence?' One-half of the answer lies in popularity. Van Dijck and Poell (2013, p. 7) stated that 'popularity is conditioned by both algorithmic and socioeconomic components'. This means that, on the one hand, it depends on the ability of the individual to 'play the media and lure crowds' (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 6). On the other hand, it is about algorithms and how social media platforms are programmed to filter out popular items and influential people.

For example, in a study on Facebook's algorithmic power, Bucher (2012) described the in-built mechanism that boosts the popularity of certain individuals, events or even thoughts. Whenever a topic on Facebook receives 'likes' from the user, there is a like score. The higher the like score, the higher the social capital and the more likely Facebook is to push the topic to the front page regardless of the content itself. Although this may promote social experience, it also results in a 'like economy' (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013) that equates 'likes' with economic value. In a study on algorithms, Uricchio (2011) described this concept as the 'algorithmic turn', where both users and programmers (including the companies and enterprises behind the programming) take turns in steering the user experience.

Even as we look at consumers gaining power through popularity, this inevitably creates disparity because not everyone can be popular. As Van Dijck and Poell (2013, p. 7) stated, 'some people [on social media] are more influential than others, partly because the platform tends to be dominated by few users with large followings [and] partly because the platform assigns more weight to highly visible users'. Popularity can be calculated by a Klout score, which measures the presence and influence of a user (Knapp, 2012). As a result, 'advertisers or employers may single out certain "super-users" and pay them to perform promotional tasks or jobs' (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 7). This also means that individual users have the potential to decide the trend and steer the user experience, provided that they have sufficient social capital.

However, it is not easy for an individual consumer to be considered part of the dominant class. In order to gain popularity, individuals often engage in unethical or manipulative practices to elevate their visibility. In research on popularity pursuit as a driver for Twitter behaviour, Steinmetz (2018) found that popularity steers and manipulates both the public and the individual. When individuals post something on Twitter, they seek the optimal number of likes and are disappointed if their post does not receive an acceptable level of attention. To drive likes, individuals are incentivised to do whatever it takes. Drawing on an analogy with rats who become conditioned to press a lever to get a pellet, the like economy similarly conditions humans to post content that triggers a reaction (Steinmetz, 2018). As a result, for individuals to become popular or continue to be popular, there is a tendency to consciously generate *moral outrage* in Tweets. In addition, algorithms that have been shown to be built into social media platforms that promote popular content (Beer, 2009) aid in the spread of moral outrage and make people vulnerable to exploitation (Steinmetz, 2018).

2.2.3.1.3. Connectivity. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) defined connectivity as:

> [T]he socio-technical affordance of networked platforms to connect content to user activities and advertisers. More precisely, in a connective ecosystem of social media, the 'platform apparatus' always mediates users' activities and defines how connections are taking shape, even if users themselves can exert considerable influence over the contribution of content. (p. 8)

While popularity allows consumers to become dominant users, the underlying message is that not everyone can be a dominant user. The methods of obtaining popularity take many shapes and forms. However, they can all be summarised with the term 'connectivity', which is the second half of how consumers counter against commercial control over programmability. Connectivity is more than just one consumer linking to another. Rather, it illuminates the consumer's active

engagement with the media to create and expand their influence. This connectivity can be explored in two ways: (1) spreadability, which highlights the impact of consumer networks on marketing and the resulting consumer-centric approach that modern business employs to deal with consumer engagement and (2) the great digital divide, which highlights that consumer engagement (with media IT) is important to stay connected and be part of this negotiation of power.

Spreadability. The notion of connectivity is closely related to the similar concept of spreadability (Jenkins, 2004b, p. 34). Media content becomes spreadable through a process known as convergence, whereby the content can be consumed and passed along through social networks. For example, in a study on how an advertiser builds a brand relationship using Facebook, Lipsman et al. (2012) outlined that the advertiser creates content about a product, which generates alerts that are sent to the brand community. The alerts then allow fans to respond to the advertisement by using 'like' or 'comment' buttons. Alerts are then automatically sent to fans' friends. In this way, the process creates a fast-spreading advertisement across the social network (Eunsun et al., 2015, p. 830).

Due to the effect of spreadability, researchers have looked at audience consumption as both a commodity and as labour (Bolin, 2012; Smythe, 1981). Smythe (1981) studied audience consumption from the perspective of how the 'labour' produced by their consumption can be exploited by advertisers, while Bolin (2012) examined audience consumption as production–consumption circuits that generate identities and social meanings, resulting in productive consumption and additional economic profit. Similarly, Andrejevic (2009, p. 419) examined this value creation process and how media companies (such as YouTube) mine data by using audience participation and create an interactive economy, allowing for the rise of a consumer-centric marketing approach in the online sphere (Malthouse et al., 2013). This may signal a certain loss of control over the informational flow by commercial participants, which means that contemporary consumers will naturally come into contact with information that is not official marketing material (Hanna et al., 2011). Hence, it has been argued that the relationship between the modern consumer and organisations is comprised of multi-dimensional communication borne from the consumers' need for 'interactive, collaborative, and personalized interactions' (Baumöl et al., 2016, p. 199).

Many businesses prosper when they are able to capture the consumer's desires and daydreams, and this process often requires the business to listen to what the consumer wants, letting the consumer be the determiner of the product. Companies and products such as eBay (online private

store), Facebook (social network), Twitter (blog), Wikipedia (collaborative project), YouTube (content community), Second Life (virtual world) and *World of Warcraft* (game; Denegri-Knott, 2011; Baumöl et al., 2016, p. 199) have benefitted from allowing the consumer agenda to drive their products. Indeed, Lehmkuhl and Jung (2013, p. 199) suggested that media has transformed consumers' roles from consumers to producers of a complex dialogue with organisations, as well as with their peers, about various topics from private to social and from brands to services. In this regard, Bourdieu (1984, p. 100) once stated that 'the consumer helps to produce the product he consumes, by a labour of identification and decoding'. Indeed, not only does the consumer help to produce the product they consume, the social value of the product is determined by how each product is being consumed through a process of social dialogue (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 21).

Researchers have identified the importance of this social dialogue process by analysing the consumption interface (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Seo, 2013). Indeed, it has been suggested that products and services should be viewed as a process instead of completed merchandise (Canniford, 2011). Modern consumers have become part of the production process through the intervention of technology. Furthermore, the marketing of the product has 'departed from top-down enterprises in corporate control, to multilateral negotiations within complex galaxies of "brand culture"' (Canniford, 2011, p. 592). Indeed, this has created a power-sharing situation in the marketplace, where the consumer is enabled to negotiate power with the marketer.

While there is a clear acknowledgement that consumers utilise emerging technologies to participate in co-creative product and development activities and that commercial interests, to one extent or another, embrace the presence of the consumer as an influential voice, the influential class still has programmability and control. Many social connections are automated, manipulated and steered by algorithms (Beer, 2009). While co-creative opportunities exist, the possible choices are predetermined by the producer. In essence, this is similar to the concept of forced choice remarked upon by Bourdieu (1984) when they commented that economic necessity and necessary economic were often forced choices produced by the social field and habitus.

In other words, taste can be seen as both freedom and suppression, a forced choice that nevertheless is still a choice. With the spreadable effect of media, the set of forced choices has certainly expanded, and the more choices there are, the bigger the impact these choices will have on the status quo (Parsons, 2016, p. 3) as well as on the daydreams of the consumer (Baumöl et al., 2016, p. 199).

2.2.3.1.4. The Great Digital Divide. The notion of spreadability is a way for consumers to use their engagement with a brand through media IT to negotiate power with the brand owner. It multiplies the consumer(s) voice through the networks and can be measured in terms of popularity. If a wish, desire or even daydream is popular enough, it will be heard by the influential class and change the way they program the media platform behind the scenes. However, spreadability does not just happen because the technology is there. Consumers cannot fully engage with media IT without a basic knowledge of what is possible. For example, Goldie (2006) discussed how UK consumers failed to get the most out of developing technology, with 54% of respondents stating that they did not 'get the most out of [their] products', 47% confessing that 'the pace of change of technology [was] too fast' and 86% identifying that technology was becoming harder to use and that there were not enough instructions given on how to operate the products they purchased. This problem was visible across various digital products, leading to the conclusion that 'what people want from a digital service and what they receive' (Goldie, 2006) can often be very different.

Thus, Goldie (2006) identified an important aspect of connectivity – the ability of consumers to engage with the technology. The concept of the great technological divide (Mudur, 2004) is relevant to our understanding of this. Eastin et al. (2015, p. 416) stated that the 'digital divide suggests individuals in certain demographic groups, such as racial minorities, rural communities and individuals of lower socioeconomic status, are at a disadvantage due to unequal access to the Internet'. In other words, the digital divide is concerned with the inequality of access to digital technology, but this access relates to both access to technology and the ability to use said technology (Goldie, 2006).

Originally, the digital divide was solely focused on access to digital technology (NTIA, 1999), which was examined in terms of race, gender, education, geographical location and similar demographic characteristics (Mossberger et al., 2003). However, as access to digital technology became commonplace, researchers argued that 'the usefulness of this conceptualization of the digital divide [had] waned' (Eastin et al., 2015, p. 418). Instead, Wei and Hindman (2011) stated that one should move from a basic access-based digital divide (which they called 'first-level') to an emphasis on the inequities of 'range and quality of use' (which they called 'second-level'). In the example of Goldie (2006), 100% of the survey respondents (i.e. UK consumers) consumed digital products, so there was no issue of access – all the respondents had equal access to the technology. Yet, 54% felt that they lacked the ability to fully use the product. Assuming that this figure reflects the broader reality, this means that 46% of the population are of a higher level of

competency in terms of engagement with the product compared to the rest – thus revealing a significant influence and power schism.

One of the effects of this digital divide is the creation of a knowledge gap. The digital divide is shifting from access to information to an individual's ability to 'find, critically assess, and store information' (Eastin et al., 2015, p. 419). For example, in a study on internet use, Wei and Hindman (2011) found that different educational levels on issues such as political knowledge were amplified through an increase in internet use. This finding was enhanced by Bourdieu (1984) concept of cultural capital, in particular, that the range of consumers' actions is associated/predetermined by their cultural exposure and background.

In the context of the concepts of popularity and connectivity, it is possible for consumers to seize the power of influence. However, the system favours those consumers who have the ability to obtain information and gain an advantage in various fields of social engagement (Eveland Jr, 2002). This divide resides at the centre of this research because consumer stewards evolve and command the necessary influence, skill and capital to dominate programmability, popularity and spreadability outcomes. The subsequent sections will demonstrate that consumer stewards are privileged in terms of cultural capital, such as education, referent power, expert status and community acceptance as leaders (Bourdieu, 1984).

2.2.3.1.5. Summary and Logic Links. This literature review so far allowed us to extract the following conceptual setting. On the one hand, the influential classes (for example, engineers, companies, brand owners and corporate bodies) are the users of media IT who can exert their influence through programmability. On the other hand, consumers (especially consumer stewards) are capable of negotiating power through engagement in the forms of popularity and connectivity.

Within this struggle for control between commercial interests and consumers, the program behind the medium (ICT) determines that only a few voices from the consumer side can be clearly heard, and they inevitably belong to those who are most popular and connected (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). With this concept in mind, the notion that consumer stewards are able to emerge from the community becomes even more curious, as they seem to possess different capitals and/or powers when compared with other consumers. The second part of this section serves to look at a specific community with high ICT integration, thereby allowing a more detailed analysis of consumer stewards and how they function within online communities in ways that are different from other consumers.

2.2.3.2. ESports Consumer Communities. This study will now turn to eSports as the context for an in-depth study of the phenomenon of consumer stewards. The rationales for focusing on this community are as follows:

- ESports consumer communities are built on the consumption of a digital product, which makes them one of the most IT/ICT-engaged modern consumer groups.
- ESports is a fast-growing industry that has been gaining popularity in the eyes of marketers and scholars alike (Funk et al., 2018; Jenny et al., 2017; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Seo, 2013).
- ESports is part of the sports and entertainment industry; therefore, there is an abundance of secondary data to complement the primary data.

This part is divided into two small segments: The first segment aims to survey the existing literature surrounding eSports. The second segment applies the conceptual frameworks from the existing literature on Bourdieu's social theory, power and ICT to eSports consumers and eSports consumer stewards.

2.2.3.2.1. ESports. ESports are organised video game competitions (Jenny et al., 2017). Hamari (2017) called them 'a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces' (p. 221). ESports contain various platforms and genres, including fighting games (e.g. *Street Fighter*), first-person shooters (e.g. *Overwatch*), multiplayer online battle arenas (e.g. *League of Legends*), racing games (e.g. *Track Mania*), real-time strategy games (e.g. *StarCraft II*), sports games (e.g. *NBA 2K*) and online digital collectible card games (e.g. *Hearthstone*). Similar to the way traditional sports branch out into different activities, these different platforms and genres of eSports also form many subcultures. ESports generally create either imitations or representations of reality (Burk, 2013). For example, *StarCraft II* is often praised for its simulation of military battles (Ratliff, 2014). Additionally, similar to traditional sports, eSports have built-in methods to measure players' performance levels (Seo, 2013). Indeed, Seo and Jung (2016) remarked that in sport-themed eSports, the rules match their real-world counterparts exactly to create the perfect simulation.

The Literature on eSports. ESports has attracted much scholarly attention for its complex social, economic and commercial composition, which is seen more as a 'constellation of marketing actors participating in the co-creation of value, and these actors originate from both the companies and consumers' (Seo, 2013, p. 1543) than as a traditional market–consumer

dynamic. First, many have compared eSports and traditional sports and have tried to either justify or oppose calling it a sport (Hamari, 2017; Holt, 2016; Pizzo et al., 2018; Witkowski, 2012). One of the reasons for this is that the body and physical activity have been tied to sporting activity since the beginning of competitive sports, and they are still considered important criteria today (Witkowski, 2012). At the same time, researchers such as Hamari (2017) argued that 'although the outcome-defining events of the sport occur within the confines of an electronic, computer-mediated environment, it does not in any way imply that eSports cannot be physically taxing for players' (p. 212). There are certainly those who advocate for eSports' treatment as an actual sport by identifying its complexity and similarity to traditional sports (e.g. Holt, 2016; Pizzo et al., 2018).

Since eSports is part of the video game genre, there is the stereotype that only young or socially isolated men play eSports (Casselman, 2015). This is incorrect. Souza (2015) studied eSports fan groups and found that although it is true that many eSports spectators are young people, this is because the market for eSports games targets a young generation of consumers. ESports athletes also tend to be young, but this has two reasons. First, eSports is still a new phenomenon. The first eSports tournament was held in 1972, but it was not until the 1990s that eSports really took off (Larch, 2019). Second, many eSports games have a very short history. For example, *StarCraft II* was created in 2010, *Hearthstone* was created in 2014 and *Overwatch* was created in 2016 (IGN, 2020). This limits such games' consumer groups regarding age and population diversity. However, as Souza (2015) stated, most eSports fans are full-time employees, and there are large segments of female consumers and parents in the community.

ESports are also perceived as subversive (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). To understand this, we can consider the concept developed by Bourdieu (1984), which explained the relationship between the dominant culture (a.k.a. the norm) and newly developed cultures with regard to their struggle for legitimacy. As Bourdieu (1984) stated, 'these struggles over the legitimate definition of culture and the legitimate way of evaluating it are only one dimension of the endless struggles which divide every dominant class' (pp. 93–94). ESports is currently developing its cultural identity and legitimacy. According to recent studies, eSports increasingly receives mainstream media coverage (Funk et al., 2018). With enough time, its legitimacy can be established, and it can be perceived as the new norm (Bourdieu, 1984).

Another unique phenomenon in eSports (compared to traditional sports) is the matter of ownership. In traditional sports, no one person or organisation can claim that a certain sport belongs to them. For example, the Australian Football League (AFL) can host a sports event and

set rules and regulations, but the AFL does not own football. Meanwhile, eSports is about playing competitive video games, and several different companies have ownership of these games as material products. For example, Valve Corporation owns *Counter-Strike*, Blizzard Entertainment owns *StarCraft II* and Riot Games owns *League of Legends*. Such specific ownership means that, unlike in the case of football, a player cannot play 'e-sports competitions without software provided and maintained by a particular corporate entity' (Funk et al., 2018, p. 12). In addition, these entities have the power to change the dynamic of the game at the push of a button. For example, to keep *StarCraft II* new and fresh, Blizzard Entertainment has a 'balance team (developer)' that often introduces new updates, such as the addition of a completely new mechanic or the removal of an old mechanic (us.battle.net, 2018). Briefly, specific ownership means that (1) owners are omnipotent beings in their respective eSports and (2) since each eSports title is also a brand, players are also consumers who are part of a brand community whenever they play a game.

Because of the commercial nature of eSports, ownership (for example, private ownership) means that organisationally, eSports lack a certain infrastructure that traditional sports possess. For example, in the documentary by Ratliff (2014), both eSport athletes and team managers talked about the cruel business side of the industry. Specifically, there are no retirement benefits or organisational support outside of the teams. Further, there is no overseeing body, such as the AFL, to ensure that rules and regulations remain fair and are considered acceptable by the public.

However, this does not mean that consumers cannot challenge the god-like position of the brand owner. Interestingly, like the emperors of old who had to employ stewards as governors of the local people, in the realm of eSports, certain individuals rise to become stewards with power or influence rivalling those of the 'emperors' of specific brands. Consider the example of *Hearthstone* and the 2019 Hong Kong protests. *Hearthstone* is an eSport developed by Blizzard. In November 2019, during the Hong Kong protest, one *Hearthstone* player, Ng Wai ('Bitzchung'), after their victory in a broadcasted tournament, voiced their support for the protestors (Gonzalez, 2019). This triggered an official response from the Chinese government:

> We express our strong indignation [at or resentment toward] and condemnation of the events that occurred in the Hearthstone Asia Pacific competition last weekend and absolutely oppose the dissemination of personal political ideas during any events [or games]. The players involved will be banned, and the commentators involved will be immediately terminated from any official business. Also, we will protect [or safeguard] our national dignity [or honour]. (Gonzalez, 2019)

Immediately after this, Blizzard banned Bitzchung, a decision that received a heavy backlash from the community, forcing Blizzard to reverse its decision and issue a strongly worded warning instead (Gonzalez, 2019). Of course, the community never forgot the incident, and the effects of this 'shit-storm' (as the community called it) can be felt on the internet to this day. In this example, Bitzchung, a consumer, had become a steward-like figure within the community, and there were many who were willing to follow them. When the emperor (the brand owner) wished to punish its steward for reasons the community did not endorse, there were consequences.

2.2.3.2.2. ESports Consumers. In Section 2.1 on consumer cultural identity, we explored various identities that consumers, especially consumers with high engagement (for example, consumer stewards), can obtain. In this section, using eSports consumers as a case study, we will explore specific identities that were found to be most relevant to consumer stewards. These identities are those of the consumer, leader, producer and marketer.

Players as Consumers. Because of the nature of eSports, being the consumer of an eSport means fulfilling certain necessary criteria. For example, consumers need to have access to a certain level of technology. To play basketball, one needs a ball, a hoop, a court and so on. Similarly, to play eSports, one must have access to a computer, the necessary skills to operate it, a stable and fast internet connection and so forth. This means that these consumers are already technologically advanced compared to other consumer groups. This elevates the consumer group to a higher calibre, with greater degrees of access to and use of information afforded to them by their social class, inevitably resulting in a greater range of 'what is possible' compared to those less fortunate (Bourdieu, 1984). Of course, the term *higher calibre* was not used to suggest that this consumer group is allocated to the high end of the social ladder. Rather, it is a term used to generalise the minimum capital and habitus required to be part of this community. It is possible for a consumer from a lower economic and social capital background to be a highly successful part of an eSports brand community.

It is also useful to understand what consumers consume from eSports. Their consumption is fundamentally different from that of consumers of traditional sports. In a traditional sport, such as football or basketball, consumers buy the basic tools to play the game. However, there is no brand that represents the entire essence of what it means to play the game; thus, there is no consistent brand consumption. For example, one can buy a Michael Jordan brand of basketball shoes, but Michael Jordan does not equal basketball. Without this brand, the game can still be

played. Hence, consumers of traditional sports are generally forced into the role of the spectator because when they play sports, there is no requirement for them to consume brand.

ESports is different in this regard because one must add a dimension of ownership into the equation. Ownership equals legitimate power for the brand owner within an eSport. ESports consumers consume two things: (1) the brand that acts as a product, which can be purchased and both allows and requires repeat consumption after the initial purchase and (2) spectatorship, which is consumed in a similar fashion as in traditional sports (Pizzo et al., 2018). This means that whenever consumers play eSports, they consume the brand, which makes them a constant consumer. On the other hand, spectatorship marks a point of similarity between eSports consumers and consumers of traditional sports. It is important for us to understand this similarity. As Pizzo et al. (2018) stated, '[u]nderstanding whether eSport operates similarly to traditional sport is key to developing appropriate marketing strategies for the eSport industry and can inform academic research' (p. 109).

One benefit of studying eSports spectators is that it can reveal a great deal about the identity and reality these spectators wish to construct. In a study on spectatorship by Hamari (2017), the researcher employed the uses and gratification theory, which examines 'why and how people consume or use different kinds of media to satisfy different kinds of needs' (p. 214). The study found that 'escapism, acquiring knowledge about the games being played, novelty and eSports athlete aggressiveness were found to positively predict eSport spectating frequency' (Hamari, 2017, p. 211). The findings on escapism from everyday life are particularly interesting. This notion echoes Section 2.1 on identity and reality, where it was argued that people seek out online interactions because doing so allows them to create alternate personae that are normally unobtainable in real life (Popescu, 2019). This unobtainable identity is also reflected in those individuals' desire to change their social positions (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, with gaming and role-playing, everyone wants to be the hero in their own story, and as long as the player actively seeks it out, they can find the identity/role suited to them (Shaw, 2010).

Another interesting finding from Hamari (2017) was that eSports spectators do not see any correlation between social interaction and watching. This led Hamari to conclude that social dimensions may not have a major influence on the frequency of watching. One explanation for this is that while online spectators can interact through forums, chats and other digital means, 'this form of online social interaction may not afford the same level of social gratification as co-located social interaction might' (Hamari, 2017, p. 222).

However, this could merely be because some activities, such as spectatorship, do not require as much social interaction as others. Another possibility is that while spectatorship may be the common link between eSports and traditional sports, being a constant consumer is what makes eSports special. During consumption, consumers can engage in consumer-to-consumer communication (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Hua (2015) reported on the number of friends teenagers are making online: '57% of teenagers aged 13 to 17 have met at least one new friend online, with girls meeting people primary through social media and boys through gaming or eSports' (Hua, 2015, p. 15). Indeed, when interviewed, club president Patrick Huang of University of Michigan's League of Legends (eSports) club community 'defines his club simply as a way to meet people with a common interest in eSports and the online component only strengthens their bond' (Hua, 2015, p. 15). According to Huang, they met their first online friend when they were 13, and they are still friends to this day.

Professional Pursuits. Thus far, we have demonstrated that eSports players remain consumers as long as they interact with the brand, either directly (i.e. playing the game) or indirectly (i.e. spectating the gameplay). However, the existing literature mentioned in previous sections demonstrated that there are individual consumers who can ascend beyond the traditional role. One key indication of this ascension is a sense of professionalism (Seo, 2016). Seo (2016) observed the creation of a different cultural product through an eSport consumer's pursuit of professionalism. This sense of self-actualisation and identity development is a form of consumption that is different from leisure or work. As Seo (2016, p. 264) stated, through their consumption process, those eSport consumers are able to move away from the mainstream culture and become 'a skilled adherent of the professionalised consumption field and then toward reconciling these pursuits with other important aspects of his or her life'. Thus, through this professional pursuit, three additional roles are born: leader, producer and marketer.

Consumers (Players) Identify as Leaders. Brand communities, like all social networks, possess a complex hierarchical structure. However, to become a leader within this community is to raise one's social status and change one's social trajectory, which requires an increase in various types of capital (Bourdieu, 1984). This, of course, means an exchange of measures of capitals for powers in order to reach an overall gain. To become a leader in a brand community, individuals need to 'invest time, energy, and money' (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 56). The most common way for a leader to emerge through a brand community is by becoming an expert. This is simply because individuals shows increasing willingness to take advices if these advices were from experts (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991, p. 53) than from ordinary consumers.

The leader in an eSport will likely also be the most knowledgeable person in that community, rich in both informational and expert power (Sivunen & Siitonen, 2010, p. 23).

To speak of the role of a leader, it is necessary to discuss the characteristics or duties expected from a leader. In a study on leaders and followers of a brand community, Katz and Heere (2013, p. 277) used codes such as '"gatekeeper", "creator", "organizer", and "supply purchaser" to symbolise "leader roles"'. They emphasised the role of a group leader's duty of creating, developing and forming a group identity. The leader is like a nexus from which a social network can develop. This nexus is crucial, as it is a highly connected point (through the leader's own engagement) within the network. If such a nexus were to be removed, the isolated subgroup would never come to pass (Katz & Heere, 2013, p. 278). What Katz and Heere (2013) described is the creation of a brand tribe and the important role of consumer stewards as leaders in their tribes.

Hence, leadership is important, and its categorisation/identification is doubly so. Robinson (2016), who studied virtual teams within the massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft*, stated that 'leadership and success are intrinsically linked' (Robinson, 2016, p. 187) even when team members, the environment and mission objectives are all virtually constructed. They employed what was known as behavioural complexity leadership theory, which identifies effective leaders to be 'those who have the cognitive and behavioural complexity to respond approximately to a wide range of situations that may in fact require contrary or opposing behaviours' (Denison et al., 1995, p. 526). Alongside behavioural complexity theory, Denison et al.'s (1995) competing values framework enables the division of leadership theory into four quarters: flexibility to control on the y-axis and internal to external on the x-axis, with collaborate, create, control and compete occupying each quarter, each containing three roles of leadership (12 roles in total; Robinson, 2016, pp. 180-181). This is summarised in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2

Twelve Leadership Roles, Based on Denison et al. (1995)

Internal to Flexibility		**Flexibility to External**	
Collaborate	Facilitator	Innovator	Create
	Mentor	Visionary	
	Empathiser	Motivator	
Internal to Control		**Control to External**	
Control	Coordinator	Producer	Compete
	Monitor	Driver	
	Regulator	Competitor	

It should be noted that Robinson (2016, p. 187) expressed concerns that leadership in the virtual environment may function differently compared to leadership in the material world. This could be the result of the limited expression the current technology provides its user compared to the real world (Robinson, 2016, p. 187). As Salles (2015, p. 82) suggested, digital data 'stores the representations of the real … in the form of digitally coded data, digitization being by definition a reduction of the real'.

When considering leaders of brand tribes, one needs to remember that the brand tribe is part of a brand community. This means that by becoming the leader of a tribe within a brand community, the individual also becomes one of many brand leaders. Brand leaders 'are responsible for leading brand building activities in very complex systems within organizations (e.g., sales, marketing, operations, finance)' (Gifford & Newmeyer, 2019, p. 1). From the literature on consumer culture theory, it is clear that the leader of a brand tribe can act as an opinion leader for the group (Cova & Cova, 2002) and can command considerable brand loyalty.

When we say that consumer stewards 'command' brand loyalty, we mean that consumer stewards play a key part in installing brand loyalty within the tribe's members. Brand loyalty can be defined as 'the persistence, consistency, coherence and tendency of the relationship over time, as well as the capacity of the consumer to resist brands that do not belong to [their] loyalty set' (Lichtlé & Plichon, 2008, p. 127). McLaughlin (2016) remarked that brand loyalty is the most important facet influencing consumer behaviour, and consumer stewards help to create the brand tribe/brand community that allows brand loyalty to take hold. This is because high brand loyalty is not required to join a brand community – mere interest in the brand is sufficient. Consumer stewards, being highly active members within the brand community, are able to

influence those merely interested members to move from being curious to admiring and, finally, being enthusiastic about the brand (p. 102). This process and effect are similar, if not identical, to the consumer loyalty system many big businesses use. By giving out gift/reward cards, the goal is to turn first-time buyers into return customers and then into loyal consumers (Parsons, 2016). In this way, the important role of consumers acting as leaders within the brand community cannot be underestimated.

Consumers (Players) Identify as Producers, Co-Creators and Content Creators. Of course, a consumer requires engagement to be recognised by the community as a leader, and this engagement often takes place in the form of content creation. The ability to generate additional content is the hallmark of an active consumer, and since consumer stewards are supposed to be the most engaged members of the brand community, they are responsible for the volume of material in the community. This is evident from the fact that one important factor required for the development of a brand community is 'a large volume of communication activity or content' (Bapna et al., 2019, p. 425). This communication activity and brand content must be initiated and created by someone. While the originator of such communications and content can be the brand owner, those that keep such communications going and continuously produce content are more likely to be members of a consumer group (for example, consumer stewards) who have a high level of engagement with the brand. This is because the volume of communication and content needed for a community to develop cannot be created by the brand owner alone – a significant amount of consumer-created content is also required (Cova & Salle, 2008). As a result of the obvious benefits to the brand community, consumer stewards and brand owners often exhibit co-creative behaviours (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Seo, 2013). This process benefits both parties and infers legitimacy to consumer stewards from the brand owner, while the brand owner receives referent power from the consumer stewards in return.

Being a producer carries different expectations from those of a leader. For example, in a study on co-creation by Cova and Salle (2008, p. 272), the moment consumers start to co-create value, the communication shifts from business-to-consumer to business-to-business communication. Researchers such as Kurtuluş et al. (2015) focused on the value consumers create through co-creation, arguing that creative consumers are the ones who create the majority of the content and that the reason the brand community could grow and develop is that these same consumers (together with their networks of friends and associates) form the bases of social interactions within the community (Berthon et al., 2012, p. 5).

Furthermore, Kurtuluş et al. (2015, pp. 353-354) categorised clusters of users into five groups: social pioneers, observers, content creators, engagers and game lovers. In this study, consumer stewards can be seen as reflecting a combination of these five groups, since they all express engagement with the brand to various degrees and via different methods.

To demonstrate consumer stewards' role as content creators even further, we employ the examples in the study on eSports player co-creation by Seo (2013). In 2009, an eSports gamer group launched an annual publication on the 'role of eSport within society, economics, culture, and the marketplace, ascribing a sense of shared practice among the groups and individuals engaged with this phenomenon' (Seo, 2013, p. 1552). The most interesting aspect of this publication is that the content was entirely compiled by the players themselves. According to Seo (2013, pp. 1552-1553), this was evidence of cultural activity because it provided significant insight into the history of eSports from the perspective of all the groups that were part of the co-creation process. Indeed, Seo argued that the experience of eSports is the result of co-creation, which is 'the collaborative efforts of gaming companies, players, online communities, governing bodies, and many other stakeholders play[ing] important roles in enriching and sustaining the experiential value of eSports consumption' (2013, p. 1543).

Consumers (Players) Identify as Marketers. Finally, we explore the consumer steward's role as a marketer. We have already demonstrated that when consumer stewards are in the role of producer, their production carries great marketing and economic value (Kurtuluş et al., 2015). In a leadership position, they also carry with them a great deal of persuasive power (Gifford & Newmeyer, 2019). To be more specific, consumer stewards' leadership creates a space to instil brand loyalty, which then allows them to use referent power to embed persuasive messages within their content creation. It should be noted that the community/tribal members will notice the persuasive messages; however, because of the already-established brand loyalty, they will use consumer stewards' referent power as a way to tolerate/cope with the messages (McLaughlin, 2016). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that consumer stewards can become natural marketers.

A *Business Week* (2005) article on an eSports celebrity called Johnathan 'Fatal1ty' Wendel (Hamm & Carney, 2005) illustrated the consumer stewards-as-marketers construct. Wendel, at the age of 17, achieved fame when they earned more than $350,000 in prize money in tournaments over a period of five years. They played first-person shooter eGames when eSports was still in its infancy, and the prize pool was much smaller. However, being famous and talented still meant that they were only a gamer (i.e. a consumer), but their ability to convert their talent into marketing acumen and brand visibility made them distinctive.

Indeed, in addition to wining tournaments, Wendel was an important public figure and contributed to the popularisation of computer games (Hamm & Carney, 2005). They were so successful in this role of statesperson of eSports that the public gave them the title of 'the Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan of cyberspace' and helped gather millions of eSport spectators (p. 86). In short, Wendel actively tried to promote the brand of the game they played as well as eSports activities in general.

Furthermore, Wendel actively promoted their own brand. Their gamer name 'Fatal1ty' was licenced to several hardware makers and hat, clothing and shoe companies (Hamm & Carney, 2005, p. 90). This turned Wendel from a regular consumer/player into a legitimate businessperson. Eventually, they partnered with a computer company and became a hardware developer. Throughout this rise to fame, Wendel acted independently in regard to their relationship with the eSports brand they played for. Therefore, they were never a contracted marketer for any brand except their own. The brand owner's role in this story was to produce the game, host the tournament and distribute the prize money. In other words, there was no direct monetary connection between the brand owner and Wendel. Nevertheless, a 'mere' consumer was able to successfully and powerfully promote the brand (Hamm & Carney, 2005).

Therein lies the great value of consumer stewards as marketers of games. Unfortunately, there is also great risk. Based on the example above, consumer stewards function in related but independent ways from the brand and brand owners. The main force that drives consumer stewards is their engagement with the brand, but the method of engagement can be for or against the brand owner's interest. Of course, one may ask why consumer stewards who are so devoted to a brand would attempt to harm it. The answer is that brand owners can occasionally misrepresent the brand itself. The brand is the identity of a product, and like all identities, it creates a social reality for consumers of the product (Watson, 2009). In fact, one could argue that compared to individual identity, which may not have ties with anyone, the identity of a product is designed to be consumed by consumers – the more, the better. As each consumer consumes the brand, a narrative is created that makes the product a part of the consumer's own reality and influences their social identity. Hence, it makes sense that there would be a backlash against brand owners who misrepresent a brand. The brand owner is the legal owner of the product, but the brand community represents its collective consciousness.

One example of this was the announcement of a mobile game *Diablo Immortal* during a Blizzard-hosted game show in 2018. *Diablo Immortal* was an offshoot of an extremely popular PC game series called *Diablo*. The press release for *Diablo Immortal* was a disaster. *Diablo* fans

had always been PC gamers; hence, they were upset to see their favourite pastime reduced to another money-grabbing mobile game (McWhertor, 2018). Blizzard was accused of being insensitive, betraying the trust of its fans and not caring about its consumers (Knoop, 2018). Perhaps even more important than these fan reactions, just two days after the press release, Activision Blizzard's stock dropped by 7.03%. The company had 762.41 million outstanding shares at the time, meaning it lost $3.7 billion in two days (Tassi, 2018). This supports the observation of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) that, sometimes, brand owners have less understanding of the brand than the brand community because they lack the appreciation of 'the culture, history, rituals, traditions, and symbols of the community' (p. 419).

Furthermore, these events occurred without the community even playing the game. This is important because in 2020, two years after the aforementioned game show disaster, a small public demo was released, which generally received positive reviews for the gameplay (Shea, 2021). This case reveals consumer stewards as even more important in shaping community opinion; they understand how to communicate with the community, and they can sometimes be even better at it than the brand owners. During the *Diablo Immortal* announcement, two infamous events occurred. First, a fan stood up and asked whether it was an April Fool's joke. Second, the developers of the game were 'booed' while on stage. To this day, a search for 'Diablo Immortal' on YouTube throws up the video *The Moment Diablo Died At Blizzcon 2019 (Hardcore Death Highlight),* which has 6.6 million views (Nexius, 2018). This is just a single video among the thousands that are out there, but it reveals how much negative press activist members of the community, or consumer stewards, created. This fact alone should caution brand owners and make them bring consumer stewards into the centre of their marketing campaigns.

2.2.3.2.3. ESports Summary and Logic Links. Through the in-depth analysis of consumers – specifically, consumer stewards – in eSports communities, one key concept that emerged is professionalism (i.e. a consumer's expression of engagement with the brand). It is this that separates an ordinary eSports consumer's identity from the identity of a consumer steward. Through this professionalism, consumer stewards are able to carry out roles beyond that of an ordinary consumer. In addition, when we examined consumer stewards' roles as leaders, marketers and producers, just as the existing literature indicated, consumer stewards were found to occupy a delicate social position between brand owners and other consumers (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Siguaw et al., 2014). This suggests delicate identity management (Young, 2009b) and narrative creation (McCreery & Best, 2004).

2.3. Summary of the Literature Review

The first section of this chapter identified consumer stewards based on the existing literature on consumer culture theory and consumer identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In the second section, this chapter examined the notion of consumer stewards from three perspectives. Bourdieu's social theory highlights the concept of consumer stewards as a dominant class with a delicate social position within the social hierarchy. The existing literature on power examined the forms of influence available to consumer stewards and pointed to an exchange of capitals and powers, which leads to an increase in both. However, this exchange is not clearly defined in the existing literature and hints at the existence of undefined capitals and/or forms of power that consumer stewards possess. An analysis of consumers and media suggested that the medium used by consumer stewards is the message itself (McLuhan, 1995). Both the general examination of the existing literature on media and the specific analysis of eSports communities found that engagement is an important aspect that separates consumer stewards from other consumers and enables them to negotiate power with brand owners.

Does this mean *engagement* is the undefined force behind consumer stewards? If it is, should engagement be considered as part of consumer stewards' capital or as a form of power? It is clear that consumer stewards engage with the brand through their consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and carefully construct and groom a social identity that is capable of generating value (i.e. capitals) and influence (i.e. powers) and shifting their social position (vertical and transverse movement; Bourdieu, 1984). This suggests that approaching an interpretation of consumer stewards through the lens of identity remains the key to understanding this phenomenon. A summarize table of all important literature reviews can be view in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3

Literature Review Research Construct Summary Table

Authors	Research Context	Key related construct	Constructs
Arnould and Thompson (2005)	Consumer Culture Theory	consumers are identity seekers and makers	The identity-generated narrative that creates one's reality, which influences and is influenced by other people's realities
Schouten and McAlexander (1995)		subcultures of consumption are created through consumers' desire to create meaningful identity through consumption a particular product	Creation of Subculture of consumption
Sigamoney (2016)		subcultures of consumption groups express ever-changing identity	Subculture of consumption represent consumers' ever changing identity
Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)		brand community identify group member through a shared consciousness, ritual, traditions and obligations, which express a fixed and stable identity within subcultures of consumption	Brand community located within subculture of consumption, which represent fixed and stable identity created by consumers
Kates (2002)		brand community has hierarchy, which is created through various level of engagement by its member	Consumers use consumption as a narrative to create their identities; their engagement level creates subcultures of consumption, brand community and brand tribe
Costa e. Silva and Carnido dos Santos (2012)		consumer tribes/brand tribes are small groups within brand communities that has shared belief and an opinion/tribe leader at its centre	The highest engagement creates tribe leaders (i.e. consumer stewards)
Schneider (1981)	Identity	identity construction and reconstruction as the result of social interaction	Identity are created through social interaction

McCreery and Best (2004)		Everyone creates their own identity and communicates it to the outside world through narrative	Important role of Narrative creation
Young (2009b)		successful online identity require identity management or personal branding	consumer stewards' influential identity is the result of identity management
Bourdieu (1984)	Bourdieu's social theory	framework of social theory with emphasis on his concept of both habitus and field	An individual's social position is determined by the field and habitus they occupy as well as the combination of various volumes and forms of capital they possess, and One's social trajectory can be changed through obtaining and exchanging various forms of capital, which is a reconstruction of one's social identity
French and Raven (1959) **Raven (1965)**	Powers	Six bases of power: legitimate, reward, expert, referent, coercive and information	Forms of power available to the modern consumer Through the exercise of power, it can be translated into various forms of capital
Van Dijck and Poell (2013)	Media and communication	the three elements to examine social media logic: programmability, popularity and connectivity	Brand owner's influence = programmability (Privileged/popular) Consumer negotiates power (engagement) with brand owner = popularity + connectivity
Hamari (2017)		eSport and its current academic issue	eSport as case study for the current thesis

In light of the existing literature, this research asks the following research questions to analyse the notion of consumer stewards and aims to answer these questions in the methodology, analysis and discussion sections:

1. What are the practices of consumer stewards within the context of an online consumer community?
2. What are the constraining or enabling factors/rules within community norms and behaviours that govern consumer stewards' practices?
3. How do consumer stewards evolve our understanding of online community, social hierarchy and consumer-generated value?

Chapter 3. Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and justify the methodology that was chosen to answer this study's research questions. Following the introduction, this chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section (Section 3.1: *Good Game* Documentary Review) describes a film documentary study on a particular eSports brand, *StarCraft II*. The purpose of this case study is (1) to further explore the concept of *engagement* by identifying and analysing how consumer stewards within a particular brand community express their engagement and (2) to contextualise the *StarCraft II* brand community to allow this study to correctly interpret this community's user-generated content, which is relevant to this research.

Section 3.2: Qualitative Approach: Netnography describes the qualitative approach (i.e. netnography) that this research employed to identify and analyse three consumer stewards of the *StarCraft II* eSprts YouTube community. The purpose of using netnography is to observe consumer stewards in their own environment. The netnographic study is presented in two stages. Stage #1 identifies and justifies the selection of consumer stewards. Stage #2 describes the sampling procedures, data analysis techniques and content coding methods that were employed.

In summary, Section 3.1: *Good Game* Documentary Review shows consumer stewards at the top of their social status, their career highlights and their background engagements with the product brand, the brand owner and the brand community. One could argue that the consumer stewards in the documentary have a social status and level of influence that represent the goal every consumer steward wishes to achieve. Section 3.2: Qualitative Approach: Netnography provides periodical data from the time the consumer stewards started building their social presence on a particular media platform to the time of this study. One could argue that the goal of the three consumer stewards' engagement, expressed through the collected secondary data, is to one day achieve the social status and influence described in Section 3.1: *Good Game* Documentary Review. By comparing and contrasting their operations and interactions with the product brand, the brand owner and the brand community, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the practices of consumer stewards within the context of an online consumer community?
2. What are the constraining or enabling factors/rules within community norms and behaviours that govern consumer stewards' practices?
3. How do consumer stewards evolve our understanding of online community, social hierarchy and consumer-generated value?

3.1. *Good Game* Documentary Review

The literature review identified various important characteristics eSports consumer stewards could have (e.g. professionalism and the roles of marketer, producer and leader). In addition, engagement with the product was identified as the primary way to construct and express those characteristics. Thus, to explore the deep and complex social, political and economic environment in which eSport consumer stewards operate, this research conducted a study on a documentary film. The documentary centred on one particular eSports brand, *StarCraft II*. The purpose of this section is to provide justification for the use of the documentary in this research and the validity of selecting this particular film.

3.1.1. The Use of the Documentary Film in the Qualitative Method

The importance of media (see Section 2.2.3: Consumers and Media) in the emergence (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) and, indeed, the practice of consumer stewards (McLuhan, 1995) cannot be overstated. While the focus of the existing literature was on the impacts of media on consumers' consumption and practices, the side effect of information being spread through consumers' social networks (Jenkins, 2004a) is that audio-visual content has become a tool for documenting, creating, preserving and sharing information (Borish et al., 2021, p. 1).

Scholars have made use of these digital information storing/sharing tools as part of their social research. For example, Cunsolo Willox et al. (2012) used digital storytelling that was generated within an Indigenous community in order to explore deeper issues, such as physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health, that the researchers could not easily study through traditional interview-based narrative research. Similarly, Castleden et al. (2008) used PhotoVoice, an ethical photography project that promotes social change (Photovoice, 2022), to explore issues of injustice, inequality and exploitation within Indigenous communities.

Jewitt (2012) argued that audio-visual information, such as documentary films, allow the gathering of data that are normally unreachable through traditional methods and can potentially strengthen other methodological approaches that are used in conjunction. Borish et al. (2021) expressed similar thoughts and argued that the use of documentaries supports a research project's conceptualisation. They noted that a documentary film allows a researcher to 'recogniz[e] how place and activities are intimately connected to participant perspective' (Borish et al., 2021, p. 1).

In the case of studying eSports communities and the consumer stewards within them, there are two problems. First, consumer stewards are part of consumer tribes, and consumer tribes have

their own unique behaviours, rituals and traditions (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This creates challenges with the collection and interpretation of data generated within such communities. Second, consumer stewards can be seen as online celebrities. Therefore, they have to maintain some social distance in order to create a difference in the social hierarchy/class structure (Bourdieu, 1984). This makes access to celebrities limited, especially when they have already been over-interviewed by the press for their celebrity status. Thus, their motivation to engage in academic studies is limited (Driessens, 2015).

By using the documentary film, both these issues were eliminated. The film contextualised consumer stewards within their natural environment, and the diverse recorded interviews in the film (Ratliff, 2014) strengthened the substance of the data gathered through the netnographic approach detailed in Section 3.2: Qualitative Approach: Netnography. The rich narrative of the various interviewees from within the community strengthened the research by revealing the hidden hardship consumer stewards face to obtain/maintain their social status.

3.1.2. Documentary – Good Game and eSports brand – StarCraft II

For this research, the documentary film *Good Game* was selected. It was directed by Mary Ratliff and released in 2014. The documentary follows nine videogame players pursuing careers in competitive eSports as members of the Evil Geniuses (EG), *StarCraft 2* Division, one of many eSports teams (Ratliff, 2014). The reason this film, or more specifically, *StarCraft II*, was chosen is that it is well-liked by the community (esportbet.com, 2020; Metacritic, 2010; Twitch.TV, 2014), and the size of its brand community (Brown, 2020; Hovdestad, 2020; Iwerks, 2019), which is large (IGN, 2020). Furthermore, for a brand that was once called ‘the king of E-sport’ (Partin, 2018) and ‘the grandfather of e-Sports’ (Radaction, 2016), *StarCraft II* is rich in history, so much so that other current brands pale in comparison.

Good Game focuses on several important concepts, including the hardship of running a profitable team business, the history and life struggle that each athlete faces, *StarCraft II* as an eSport and its audience base. Through exploring these aspects, we see these nine athletes create their own unique narratives that define them, and they create a class that elevates them all to a higher level in the community.

Being part of a professional eSports team, these athletes demonstrated that they needed to invest a great deal of time, energy and money in order to gain the professionalism needed to be part of the elite class. Thus, they are constant consumers of the brand because they must consume the product if they wish to play the game. By being part of this elite class, they are celebrities of the

StarCraft II brand community, which means they enjoy a great amount of social capital. In short, these eSport athletes fulfil the characteristics required to be called consumer stewards (as established in previous sections of this chapter), and the film places great emphasis on the creation of these athletes' identities and the narratives used to communicate these identities.

3.2. Qualitative Approach: Netnography

This study aims to explain a new breed of modern consumers – consumer stewards – and its impact on the online community, social hierarchy and consumer-generated value. The following paragraphs outline the choice of research methods based on the study's purpose and research questions and justify the research methods.

This study's objectives are centred around examining the phenomenon of consumer stewards; as such, a qualitative research approach was chosen. The qualitative research method is used to define the nature of the world and the inhabitants residing within it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research examines how people make sense of the world (Wheeler & Holloway, 2002) and is adopted when results cannot be obtained through statistics or other forms of quantification (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 17). Qualitative research examines people through their history, experience and psychology, in addition to their reactions (e.g. ascribed meaning) when faced with various situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In short, qualitative research is meant to help our understanding of human experiences (Polit & Beck, 2009).

In addition to employing a general qualitative approach, this study's research questions also required an exploration of the culture within the brand community, with consumer stewards as the producers of cultural products. Therefore, the chosen methodology was ethnography, which places culture at its centre (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, the literature review established that consumer stewards could be located, as an online phenomenon, within a specific brand community, such as eSports. Thus, this study employed an ethnographic methodology within the digital environment. Based on these specific requirements, this study utilised a specific form of ethnography – *netnography* – to collect its data.

The term netnography combines 'internet' (*net*) with the word 'ethnography' (*nography*). Netnography can be defined as a 'qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications' (Kozinets, 2002a, p. 2). It was developed by Robert Kozinets in the 1990s to conduct consumer-marketing research within the digital environment (Kozinets, 2010b). Bengry-Howell et al. (2011)described netnography as providing 'an economical, effective and

unobtrusive means of studying “naturally occurring” online communication and behaviour, and generating naturalistic data about online communities’ (p. 3).

Netnography has been used to study brand-related phenomena (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018), such as exploring strategies of online branding (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017) and analysing how consumers interact and engage with brands online (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). As a result, netnography is a well-suited research approach for the study of consumer stewards because consumer stewards are an embodiment of personal branding that obtained global influence through the power of the Internet. They achieved this by facilitating engagement between brand owners, the brand, and other consumers. Furthermore, since consumer stewards can be best identified in the online environment (Seo, 2013), netnography allowed the researchers to identify and define consumer stewards and to trace how they manage their mediating function. Since it focuses on context, it provides a naturalistic and immersive interpretation of data. Using the consumer's perspective and examining the phenomenon through their eyes, netnography is less intrusive and more adaptive and naturalistic than ethnography or other quantitative methods (Kozinets, 2010a, p. 1).

This was also the case in a study on loneliness and isolation among doctoral students by Janta et al. (2014), where netnography was used to gather data from public forms using the keywords ‘loneliness’ and ‘lonely’, and it enabled the researchers to discover a common theme in 122 pages of students’ expressions of their feelings. A significant part of this was that such emotional data were obtained in a non-intrusive way and without seeking informed consent from the sources (Janta et al., 2014, p. 558). Similarly, Yeager (2012) employed netnographic analysis in research on survivors of sexual violence because of its ability to provide ‘in-depth understanding of a group or situation from the point of view of its members’ (p. 70) and the ‘unobtrusive nature of the methodology’ (p. 71). This is particularly important to the current study because this thesis aims to explore the phenomena of consumer stewards. This phenomenon is built upon the issue of engagement, motivation, popularity, and personal branding, all of which are subjective between consumer stewards and their followers. As a result, one way to study this phenomenon is by observing it from the viewpoint of consumer stewards and their followers without disrupting the nature going-on of the phenomena. As Kozinets (2010b, p. 60) stated, netnography ‘uses computer-mediated communications as a data source to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon’.

Netnography is also useful for accessing targeted populations that are difficult to locate, such as brand tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002). In the brand tribe, it can be difficult to access tribe leaders

(i.e. consumer stewards) because, as part of the dominant group, consumer stewards tend to create social distance from lower groups (Bourdieu, 1984). Netnography allowed this research to resolve these issues through access to consumer-to-consumer communications. Such communications are valuable because they happen in a natural context instead of a laboratory-simulated environment. In addition, they were obtained unobtrusively, that is, without disrupting the natural environment. Since such communications can be retrieved the instant they appear, 'data can be obtained in a timely, effective, and efficient manner' (Kozinets, 2010a, p. 2).

3.2.1. Research Design

The literature review provided an image of what consumer stewards are. Although the existing literature suggested ways in which an ordinary consumer can become a consumer steward (e.g. the generation of capital [Bourdieu, 1984]) and accumulation of power [French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965; Seo, 2013]), they did not answer the question of how consumer stewards' consumption leads to a shift in their social status and an increase in their influence while an ordinary consumer's consumption does not have the same result. It was identified through the literature on media and eSports that the key is professionalism, which is derived from engagement (Kozinets, 2002b).

A two-staged research design was thus developed to study how consumer stewards engage with the product brand, the brand owners and the brand community. The goal is (1) to identify who consumer stewards are and (2) to collect data from them to answer the research questions. The detail of these two stages is documented in Table 3.1. To summarise, in Stage #1 labelled as 'consumer steward identification', the purpose was to clarify who the consumer stewards were that this study would focus on and how and why they would be selected. Issues such as generalisability and transferability were also covered. In Stage #2 labelled as 'data collection', the purpose was to clarify how, why and what data were collected from consumer stewards chosen in Stage #1. Issues such as the coding method, theme-generating method, technology/software used were also covered in this stage.

Table 3.1

Research Steps

Stage	Steps	Purpose
Stage 1: Consumer steward identification	**Step 1:** Identify the *StarCraft II* YouTube community	Overall purpose: Establish the scope of the data collection process • Identify the brand community (*StarCraft II*) • Identify the social media platform (YouTube) • Identify potential consumer stewards within the brand community (YouTubers) • A total of 68 YouTubers were identified
	Step 2: Select consumer stewards from the *StarCraft II* community	Overall purpose: Apply a data reduction procedure • Apply feature selection (reduce data size from 68 to 34) • Substantiate the participant pool (show that the data size [34] has validity and generalisability and represents a larger phenomenon) • Apply a scoring method (reduce the data size from 34 to 3)
Stage 2: Data collection from consumer stewards (Lowko, PiG and Day9TV)	**Step 3:** Code construction	Overall purpose: Establish the appropriate coding used for data collection • Coding dimensions: • Professional narrative (leader, producer, marketer) • Dominant class narrative: leader = establishing rules; producer and marketer = branding • Power narrative (referent, legitimate, information technology, expert, informational, rewards/coercive)

Step 4: Data collection	Overall purpose: Apply the code (in Step 3) to the scope selected (in Step 2) • Three consumer stewards were selected • Consumer stewards' YouTube channels were the source of data • Data range = the first three videos of each year since the YouTube channel's creation until 2020 • Only the first 300 comments on videos were collected and coded • LowkoTV = 30 videos • PiG = 29 videos • Day9TV = 27 videos
Step 5: Data mining	Overall purpose: Apply the techniques appropriate for data mining to discover patterns • More emphasis on branding than rules • Construction of the field and habitus specific to consumer stewards • Anomalies

Microsoft Excel was used to collect, store and analyse data. Data analysis included calculating the total repetitions for each code across every video for each consumer steward. This number is then compared within a single consumer steward's dataset and with other consumer stewards' data to determine the focus and emphasis of individual consumer stewards. A similar calculation was also applied to the feedback from consumer stewards' followers and then compared against consumer stewards' emphasis to determine the effectiveness of the message/influence embedded in the video. Data such as time of post, length of the video, and view/like/comment counts for each video were also used to calculate the growth of consumer stewards' viewership and identify their career highlights and professional development. These calculations are done using Excel Pivot Table Tool, a freely available computer-assisted qualitative data analysis tool. Such tools have been proven to save time and are reliable, accurate, transparent and easy for data storage and retrieval (Rageh Ismail, 2010).

3.2.2. Stage #1: Consumer Stewards' Identification

In Stage #1, this study identified three consumer stewards, PiG, Day9 and Lowko, of the eSports brand *StarCraft II*. They operate on the social platform YouTube. They were identified through a two-step process.

Step 1: Identify the StarCraft II YouTube Community.

In the literature review section, it was established that consumer stewards can exist within any brand community (Cova & Cova, 2002) and that they are most noticeable within the digital environment (Kozinets, 2002; O'Guinn and Muniz, 2005). For this reason, Section 2.2: Three Streams of Existing Literature logically extended the notion of consumer stewards to the consumer groups of eSports (Seo, 2013), and Section 3.1: *Good Game* Documentary Review examined the case study of an eSports brand, *StarCraft II* (Ratliff, 2014). The background of the *StarCraft II* brand community and the documentary on its social hierarchy made this brand community an ideal setting for the netnographic study. Since digital communities are highly fragmented due to the number of social media platforms on the market (Hughes & Lang, 2003), this research chose YouTube because it is one of the largest content creator platforms (Shelley. 2022), and many examples mentioned in the literature review were based on consumer stewards of YouTube (e.g. Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Nexius, 2018; Unbox Therapy, 2018 Cimooooooooo, 2019; Paish, 2018; Liudmila, 2020; Zepla, 2022a; Zepla, 2022b).

YouTube contains numerous channels created by individuals and organisations. Individual content creators are called YouTubers, and each channel has its own followership. The larger the followership, the more influence one has. If the YouTubers had created content pertaining to the *StarCraft II* brand, this study identified them as consumer stewards of the *StarCraft II* brand. YouTubers and consumer stewards will, therefore, be used interchangeably. However, to be part of the *StarCraft II* brand community, the YouTube channel had to have connected with other *StarCraft II* YouTube channels. This link could have been either bidirectional or unidirectional.

This allowed the researcher to construct a social network of the *StarCraft II* YouTube community and to further identify and select the most influential consumer stewards within the network.

Construct the StarCraft II Brand Community's Social Network.

In April 2019, the keyword '*StarCraft II'* was input into the YouTube search engine. The channel that produced the top video from this search, SC2HL, was used as a starting point. The links displayed in this YouTube channel's 'Featured' and 'Related' sections were recorded and clicked on, and this process was repeated for new YouTube channels found until all possible links were exhausted. Two criteria were applied in this process:

1. The YouTube channel must host *StarCraft II* videos.
2. The YouTube channel must link to and/or be referenced by another YouTube channel.

As a result, 68 *StarCraft II* YouTube channels were identified, and the following information was collected from them to contextualise the *StarCraft II* community.

- **Channel name**
- **Subscriber number**
- **Relationship** (featured or related)
- **Direction of the relationship** (e.g. Channel A featured Channel B, or Channel B related to Channel C)

In addition, one extra category, '**Type**', was added to apply the first filter layer to the candidate selection. This was because the 68 YouTube channels contained channels created by organisations rather than individuals in addition to YouTube channels that were once part of the *StarCraft II* community but had not posted any *StarCraft II* material for an extensive period. The core notion of consumer stewards is their engagement with the product brand, the brand owner and the brand community; a YouTuber who failed to create content on YouTube could not be considered engaged. This study defined this period as 'one year'. As such, the 'Type' category consisted of three options:

1. Official channel (symbolising a channel hosted by an organisation)
2. Not a research subject (indicating a YouTuber who is no longer active)
3. Potential research subject

The resulting *StarCraft II* YouTube Community Excel workbook (see Appendix A) was created, containing the identified categories. This Excel file contained three sheets: nodes, relationships and definition. The nodes and relationships sheets were generated by inputting data into

Onodo.com, a website tool specialising in network visualisation. The third sheet, definition, provided terminology on the additional columns generated by Onodo.com as part of social network analysis. These additional columns include:

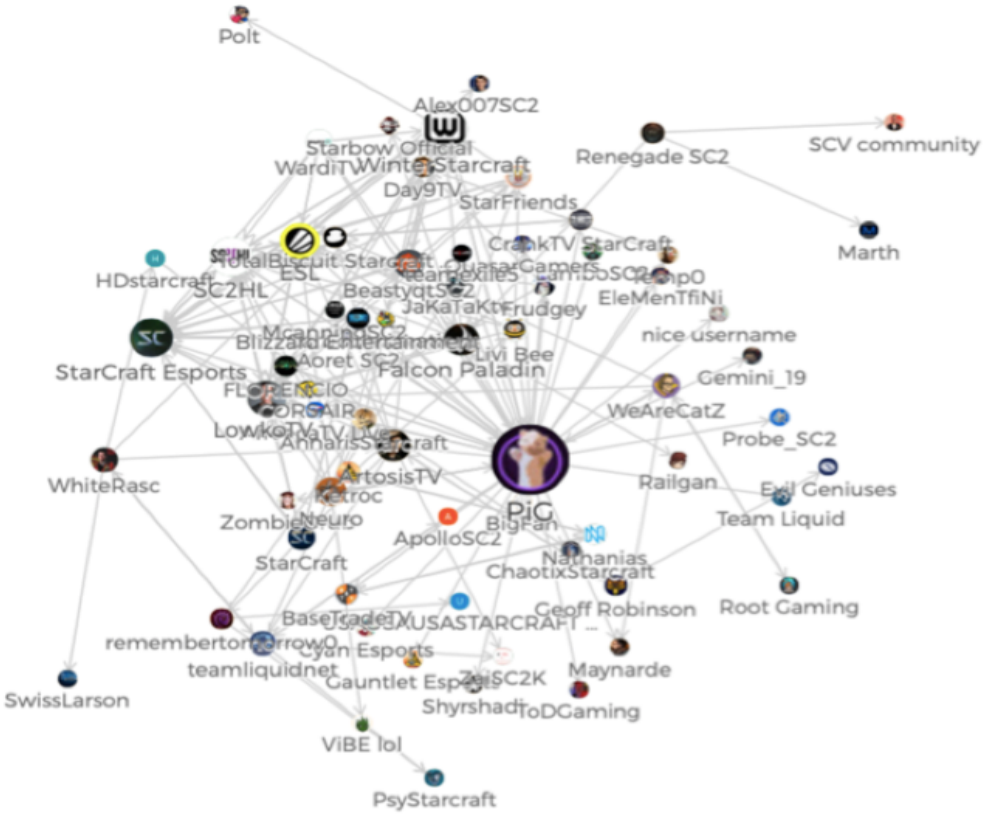
- Clustering coefficient: A large cluster implies that the network is well connected locally to form a cluster.
- Degree of centrality: The degree of a node is the number of links connected to the node. The higher the degree of centrality of a person, the more popular or more important they are within the network.
- Relevance (eigenvector centrality): Relevance indicates how connected someone is to other significantly connected people.
- Closeness centrality: Closeness centrality relates to how close the node is to other nodes. Closeness is a measurement of the node's capacity to affect all other elements in the network.
- Coreness: Coreness indicates how strongly the nodes are connected to the network.
- Betweenness: Betweenness measures how many shortest paths go through the node. Betweenness indicates how critical a node is to a network in its functioning as a bridging point between other nodes in the network.

All the above definitions were retrieved from Barbera (2017). Among these, the columns of clustering, degree and relevance relate to the YouTube channels' relationship within their local area, while the columns on closeness, coreness and betweenness concern the entire network – in this case, the *StarCraft II* community – and were, therefore, the most relevant to this study.

The data collected was displayed in Figure 3.1, which provided a graphic representation of the *StarCraft II* YouTube community network that demonstrates both the size and complexity of the community. The data used to generate Figure 3.1 can be found in Appendix A, the Figure 3.1 was also available in the following link: https://onodo.org/visualizations/68449/. The social network analysis data on clustering, degree of centrality, relevance, closeness centrality, coreness and betweenness can be found at the same link. The site automatically calculate these items, and those data were used in selecting the most influential consumer stewards in Step 2 of this study's research method.

Figure 3.1

StarCraft II YouTube Brand Community



Step 2: Select Consumer Stewards from the *StarCraft II* Community.

Sixty-eight YouTubers were identified, but not all were analysed in this study. Exclusion criteria were applied as follows: (1) YouTubers that were not individuals (i.e. consumers) or active (i.e. engaged) in the *StarCraft II* community, and (2) YouTube channels with low influence (i.e. level of engagement) within the community.

Step 2 used a variation of dimension reduction techniques in data mining (Tsai, 2007). First, a feature selection method was applied to the data to reduce 68 YouTubers to 34. Second, a scoring method was used to detect the specific characteristics or traits attributed to consumer stewards to identify three consumer stewards who exhibited the highest level of engagement. Third, data gathering was carried out to validate the selection in terms of generalisability and transferability.

Feature Selection Method.

Feature selection can be defined as 'locating the "best" minimum subset of the original features' (Cunningham, 2008, p. 9). In the data collected from the 68 YouTubers, only those labelled 'potential research subjects' under the 'Type' category were considered suitable candidates to

be treated as consumer stewards. Thus, 34 out of 68 YouTubers were removed from the data analysis, leaving the analysis to focus on 34 YouTubers.

Data Analysis: Scoring Model.

It has been emphasised that 'engagement' is important for consumer stewards. The reason those 34 YouTubers were chosen is that they are individual consumers who are engaged with the community. However, it is reasonable to assume they have varying levels of engagement with the brand (product, brand owner and brand community). It was important for the researcher to select those who demonstrated the highest level of engagement.

However, how does one measure engagement? Fulgoni (2018) discussed the difficulty of using advertising to measure consumer engagement, given that consumers' attention is becoming more divided due to the many media platforms available. Even though there are many third-party audience measurement services – which apply metrics to track viewing levels, geography and habits – the challenge is that few audiences give what they view their undivided attention. Indeed, various reports have demonstrated that a large audience group uses 'a second-screen device while watching television' (Fulgoni, 2018, p. 259). Therefore, Fulgoni (2018, p. 261) identified consumer engagement as paying 'attention to and engag[ed] with' the object in question.

Meanwhile, Calvert et al. (2014) looked at the psychological side of engagement. They stated that psychological research showed that individuals might be influenced by attitudes that are hidden from them and that many actions by consumers are based on minimal conscious thought. This creates challenges for data collection techniques, such as surveys, since they are only capable of capturing 'attempts to present oneself in a favourable way, or to relay global and generalised feelings or to appear consistent, or to hide feelings; in some settings they may even be guesses' (Calvert et al., 2014, p. 16). To resolve this, Calvert et al. (2014) used a combination of emotional profiling questionnaires and an implicit attitude test in an attempt to access consumers' true feelings and attitudes. To Calvert et al. (2014, p. 16), consumer engagement meant the 'levels of emotional attachment to' the object in question.

A third way of approaching engagement can be seen in a study conducted by Walker et al. (2017), who viewed engagement as interactivity or 'the facilitation of a relational exchange' (Walker et al., 2017, p. 131). To measure this relationship behaviour, they stated that engagement requires emotional connection, while attitude is formed from an individual's emotional connection to an object through the process of identification and internalisation. To study both engagement and attitude, participants were given a seven-point scale questionnaire and were also asked about the amount of time they spent on certain activities that were related to the questionnaire. Based on

this method, Walker et al. (2017) defined consumer engagement as the amount of time a consumer spends on the object in question correlated with their attitude towards the object in question.

From the above studies, it is clear that there is no definitive way to measure engagement. The notion of consumer stewards is based on their consumption of (i.e. engagement with) the product, and individual consumer stewards consume (i.e. engage with) the product differently in order to create their unique social identity (Friedman, 2005). Therefore, this research instead identified the expressions of engagement (i.e. consumption), then used these expressions of engagement as a scale for comparing different consumer stewards in order to select the three YouTubers (out of the potential 34) who demonstrated the most engagement as the research subjects. This method is a variation of the data analysis scoring model described by Allen and Anderson (1994). A scoring model is defined as 'a relatively quick and easy way to identify the best decision alternative for a multicriteria decision problem' (Allen & Anderson, 1994, p. 626). For this research, multicriteria refers to the different ways in which consumer stewards express their engagement with the product brand, the brand owners and the brand community.

In Table 3.2, 10 expressions of engagement were identified, and their rationales were detailed. Briefly, their identification was based on the specific action, being the consumer stewards' attempts to engage with the brand (product, brand owners and brand community) and the specific aspect/trait, being the direct result of consumer stewards' engagement with the brand (product, brand owners and brand community).

These expressions of engagement were assigned a numeric value or a Boolean value (e.g. Yes/No or True/False). The Boolean value acted as another layer of feature selection, and the numeric values were ranked. The top three expressions in each data dimension gained a score of '1', while the remaining gained a score of '0'. The scores each channel gained in each data dimension were summed, and the three channels with the highest score were considered the most engaged with the brand and, thus, the most influential consumer stewards. Table 3.2 provides a detailed list of these expressions of engagement, their descriptions and rationales, and the data collection method.

According to Table 3.2, the top three research subjects out of the 34 were 'LowkoTV', 'PiG' and 'Day9TV'. LowkoTV appeared in the top three seven times, PiG appeared five times and Day9 appeared four times. This study chose to focus on these three consumer stewards because they appear to have the highest engagement with the *StarCraft II* brand community. These results

are detailed in Appendix B, and the backgrounds of the three consumer stewards are outlined in Appendix C.

Table 3.2

Consumer Stewards' Expressions of Engagement

Expression of Engagement	Description	Rationale	Recorded Items	Scoring Method
Identity construction efforts (number of identities)	Identity description	The number of identities created by the potential participant suggests the different levels of effort the potential participant puts into identity construction and management.	The following sub-categories were applied: • Amateur-turned-professional YouTuber • Streamer (i.e. streaming gameplay on social media platforms such as Twitch) • Gamer • Announcer (amateur casting professional games) • Highlight clips from professional and amateur games • Artistic creator (i.e. the creator of cartoons and animation) • Professional *StarCraft II* athlete (either previously or currently) • Official *StarCraft II* announcer (invited or recognised as a caster for official *StarCraft II* games by the brand owner) • *StarCraft II* tournament/event organiser	Count the items in the 'Recorded Items' cell

			• *StarCraft II* coach • Game designer • Random *StarCraft II* content creator (only applied if none of the above-listed items was applicable)	
Follower size	Subscriber number on YouTube	Suggests the size of the potential participant's tribe.	This was imported directly from YouTube.	Same as the 'Recorded Items' cell
Time spent in the community	Length of time as a YouTuber in the *StarCraft II* community (x years)	Suggests the length of time spent and presence within the brand community.	This marks the YouTuber's length of existence within the *StarCraft II* community. It was calculated by using the year 2019. The data were collected minus the year the first *StarCraft II* YouTube video was created.	Same as the 'Recorded Items' cell
Professionalism	Online time	Whether the YouTuber has an official and regular time when they either post or stream online. Someone who has a	The source was grouped into three sub-categories: • Not applicable • Provided • No fixed stream time	Boolean value: not applicable = 0; provided & no fixed stream time = 1

	schedule is considered more consistent. Consistency, as shown in the literature review, is an important aspect of professionalism. To have an official time for uploading/streaming could be considered a sign of professionalism. There are three levels: Level 1: Those who upload/stream at an official time. Level 2: Those who do not have an official stream time (even if they upload/stream almost weekly). Level 3: Those who do not stream at all.	

		This could be used as an effective filter option for the dataset.		
Legitimacy accomplishment		Notable achievements marks their significant milestone in their career as consumer stewards	List of *StarCraft II* accomplishments based on recognition by the brand owner. This means that there were notable instances when the brand acknowledged the existence of the YouTuber by initiating actions of collaboration, co-creation and mutually beneficial interactions. Note: This list was sourced from various news forums and social media platforms. It was meant to be a rough list rather than an exhaustive one. However, even though the list was not exhaustive, the more famous and popular a YouTuber was, the more items would be recorded in this list.	Count the items in the 'Recorded Items' cell
Social media space(s)	Other sites	Indicates the potential participant's social reach in terms of the dimensions they occupy apart from the YouTube platform.	The list of other social media platforms used by the YouTubers provides context for the YouTuber's social reach. The more social media platforms the YouTuber employs, the more socially active the YouTuber appears to be.	Count the items in the 'Recorded Items' cell

Finance	Source of income	Indicates the financial dependence of the potential participant on their identity as a YouTuber. The more financially dependent the individual is, the more engagement is required from the individual to maintain an income.	Any source of income related to the YouTuber's activity as a *StarCraft II* content creator	Count the items in the 'Recorded Items' cell
Coreness	Coreness	Indicates the influence of the potential participant in the *StarCraft II* community.	The numeric value generated by Onodo.	Same as the 'Recorded Items' cell
Closeness	Closeness	Indicates the strength of the potential participant's connection to the *StarCraft II* community.	The numeric value generated by Onodo.	Same as the 'Recorded Items' cell
Betweenness	Betweenness	Indicates the potential participant's function as	The numeric value generated by Onodo.	Same as the 'Recorded Items' cell

	a bridging point for the *StarCraft II* community.

Generalisability and Transferability.

By the contextualisation of consumer stewards, they can exist in any brand community and on any social platform. Different social platforms (i.e. media) have their own way of communicating and their own uses; as examined in the literature, the medium itself is the message (McLuhan, 1995). Similarly, different brand communities have their own unique norms and beliefs, as stated in the existing literature (Algesheimer et al., 2005). However, the focus of this research is on engagement itself, and it used method/medium/expressions of engagement as a window to explore consumer stewards' engagement with the product brand, the brand owners and the brand community. Therefore, although the method of engagement may be different between brand communities and between social platforms, the notion of consumer stewards' engagement is the same. This is because consumer stewards are situated within the consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The social identity created through consumer stewards' consumption is not limited to a particular brand community or social platform.

According to Runkel and McGrath (1972), one way to claim generalisability is if a method will create the same result under different circumstances. From a methodology perspective, this research could make the assertion that the identified consumer stewards in the *StarCraft II* YouTube community have generalisability in terms of consumer steward engagement. Furthermore, the expressions of the engagement scoring model used in this study are also generalisable. It is likely that other researchers will adopt the same scoring model using a different set of expressions of engagement. The scoring model (Anderson et al., 2018) accepts that different consumer stewards weigh different expressions of engagement differently. This is why the scoring model used in this study compared the number of top three appearances of all 34 YouTubers. The purpose was to compare the overall weight they put into their engagement with the product brand, the brand owners and the brand community. Thus, even if the result produces a different set of consumer stewards, they still present the highest engagement level for that given dataset, which is still suitable for the study and the analysis of consumer stewards.

The research subjects can also be considered to have transferability. Transferability can be described as the ability to apply the research results of one situation to another similar situation (Jeffrey et al., 1994-2022). The 34 YouTubers (including the three selected YouTubers) were all able to demonstrate their presence in other brand communities and on other social media platforms. Eight social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Twitch.TV, Soundcloud/Reddit, Discord, Facebook, Patreon and YouTube) were searched against these 34 YouTubers to check whether they only exist on one social platform or on multiple platforms (see Appendix E).

However, in this study, only these consumer stewards' presence on YouTube was examined. The result showed that, on average, each individual had a presence on five out of the eight platforms.

In fact, the 34 consumer stewards had significant followings on other platforms as well. For example, when averaging subscriber/follower numbers across the 34 consumer stewards on the four most used social platforms in the dataset – YouTube, Twitch.TV, Facebook and Twitter – YouTube averaged 90,026 followers, Twitch.TV averaged 60,166 followers, Twitter averaged 18,181 followers and Facebook averaged 8,801 followers.

Furthermore, it was found that these 34 consumer stewards used multiple brands to build their consumer steward identity. *StarCraft II* was their most significant consumer steward identity but not the only one. For example, on average, 55 different brands were hosted on each of the consumer stewards' Twitch.TV platforms, although the brand that was hosted the most was still *StarCraft II*.

This demonstrated that the pool of consumer stewards selected for this study was not bound by a particular brand or social platform. They can be transferred as research subjects for other brand communities and on other social platforms. As such, this study asserts reasonable transferability with regard to its methodology (Jeffrey et al., 1994-2022).

In addition, this research extends the same claim to the three selected consumer stewards (LowkoTV, PiG and Day9TV) and the number of YouTube videos they created. The details of their presence in other media can be found in Appendix E. Figures 3.2 and 3.3 and Tables 3.3 and 3.4 demonstrate media presence.

Figure 3.2

Number of Followers Across Different Social Platforms for the Three Consumer Stewards

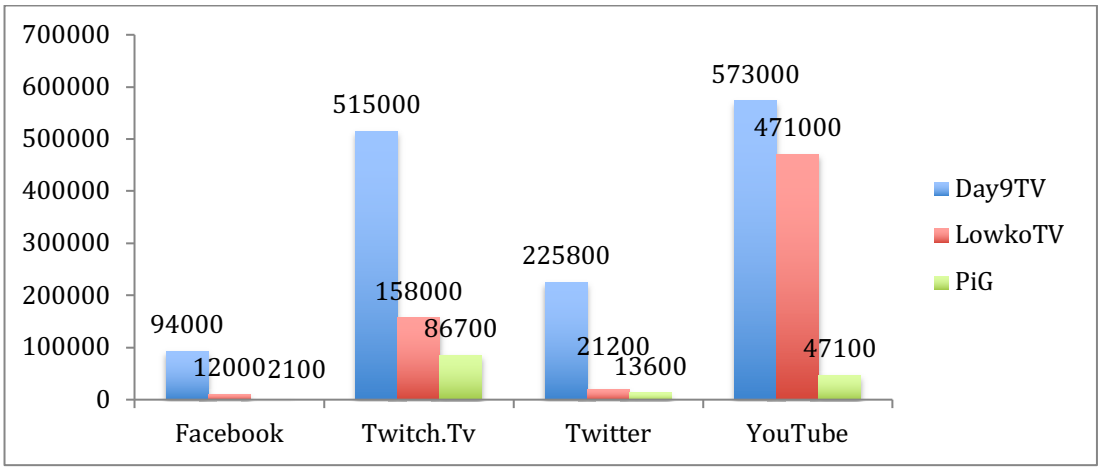


Figure 3.3

Content Creation Across Different Social Platforms for the Three Consumer Stewards

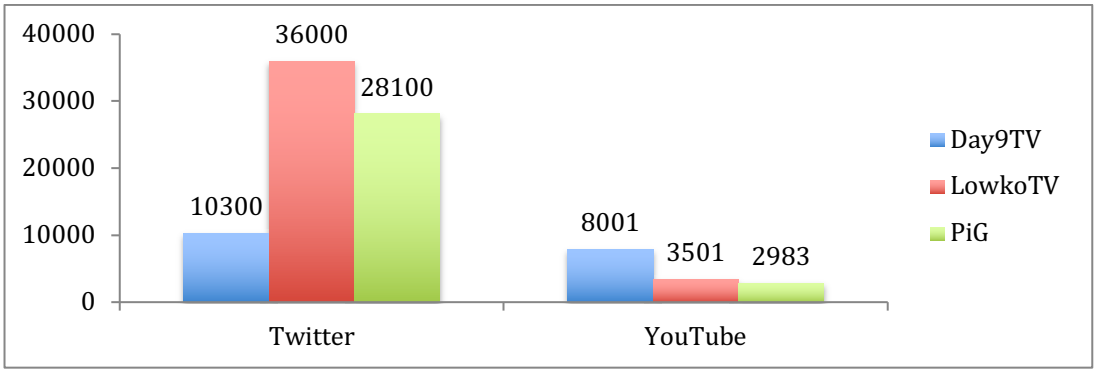


Table 3.3

Twitch Statistics for the Three Consumer Stewards

Participant	Total followers	Total views	Hours streamed	Hours watched	Average viewers	Number of brands played	Twitch ranking
PiG	86,800	7,340,000	9,255	4,950,000	535	42	2,718
LowkoTV	158,000	9,080,000	11,872	468,000,000	394	165	3,540
Day9TV	515,000	89,300,000	5,018	14,400,000	2,863	182	847

Table 3.4

Patreon Subscriptions for LowkoTV and PiG

Participant	Number of Patreon supporters	Income per month
PiG	109	AU$1,239
LowkoTV	231	AU$2,730

The two figures and tables demonstrate that the selected consumer stewards are influencers on other platforms. They also display a great deal of engagement on other platforms and play host to many other brands. Furthermore, Table 3.4 suggests that these consumer stewards are not only influencers but also idols/celebrities worshipped by their fans. Individuals are motivated to give their idols money and support them directly, which speaks volumes in terms of these consumer stewards' cultural capital.

It was also evident, as shown in Table 3.3, that a great deal of data could be gathered from other platforms, for example, Twitch.TV. However, in the data collection stage, this study only gathered data from YouTube content due to time and other resource constrain since it is unfeasible to gather and incorporate data from other social platforms. It is sufficient for transferability that Figures 3.2 and 3.3 and Tables 3.3 and 3.4 demonstrated that the phenomena of consumer stewards were not confined within a single social platform.

3.2.3. Stage #2: Data Collection from Consumer Stewards (LowkoTV, PiG and Day9TV)

As outlined in Table 3.1, three steps were carried out in Stage 2 to gather the necessary information on the three consumer stewards (LowkoTV, PiG and Day9TV) identified at the end of Stage 1. Stage 2 consisted of the following steps: code construction (Step 3), data collection (Step 4) and data mining (Step 5).

Step 3: Code Construction.

The consumer stewards' narratives can be found in each of their videos, while the audiences' feedback can be found in the comment section of each video. The commenters were labelled as 'followers'. Across each of the three consumer stewards' YouTube videos, when calculating the likes and comment counts against the view counts, using the counts of likes divided by the total view counts, only 1–2% (on average) of those who viewed the video click the like/dislike button. Then, assuming that only those who clicked the like/dislike button would take the additional effort to create a comment, using the number of feedback divided by the number of likes, only an average of 20–21% commented within an already small percentage of 1-2%. Admittedly,

individuals can comment on the video without pressing like/dislike. However, the point of the above calculation was not the accuracy of the assumption but to demonstrate the difficulty of promoting engagement from the viewer and to contrast the level of engagement of simply pressing a like/dislike or writing a word of comment to the work consumer stewards had to do to create online content.

Table 3.5 was a coding sheet used to code the video, as well as the comments on that video. The coding consisted of three levels that mirrored the analysis of the literature review, in which three literature streams were examined (see Section 2.2: Three Streams of Existing Literature), that is, Bourdieu's social theory, literature on power and literature on eSports. The literature on eSports showed that professionalism is linked to the rise of consumer stewards and that this professionalism (Seo, 2016) expresses itself through the roles of leader (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991), producer (Bapna et al., 2019) and marketer (Gifford & Newmeyer, 2019). This formed the first layer of code: professional narrative (leader, producer or marketer). Bourdieu's social theory describes consumer stewards as ordinary consumers who have become members of the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1984), asserted through a change in social trajectory. This means they have established their field (rules) and habitus (social identity). This formed the second layer of code: dominant class narrative (leader = establishing rules, producer and marketer = branding). The existing literature on power examined consumer stewards in terms of exercising various forms of power (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965). This formed the third layer of code: power narrative (referent, legitimate, IT, expert, informational and reward/coercive).

Table 3.5 shows how each code relates to these three layers of narrative. Note that one code can apply to all three layers. For example, when consumer stewards refer to the length of time they have participated in the community, this code refers to Layer 1 (being a leader), Layer 2 (establishing a rule of legitimacy) and Layer 3 (showing legitimate power). The codes were generated through the context of the *StarCraft II* brand community (provided in the case study in Section 3.1: *Good Game* Documentary Review), this researcher's knowledge of the brand community and the review of the comments on the videos from the followers.

Table 3.5

Coding Table for Consumer Stewards' YouTube Videos

Theory Layers		Codes		
Layer 1: Professional narrative		Leader	Producer (information technology, expert)	Marketer (referent, informational)
Layer 2: Dominant class narrative		Rules	Branding	Branding
Layer 3: Power narrative				
Codes	1. Referent	Like the brand (whole or part), like the leader	Like the channel	Subscription, patron, emotion, catchphrase
	2. Legitimate	Years of existence in the community or part of the community	Accomplishments, past work	Praise or speaking about the brand
	3. IT	Better tools, better quality videos	Information technology, logo, face in videos	Multiple platforms
	4. Expert	Refers to own skill, high level of difficulty and function with gameplay	Tutorial gameplay	Guide for the game
	5. Informational	Lore/trivia of the game	Guide on video	Trivia about game
	6. Reward/coercive	Thanks to patron	Future video	Subscription, patron

The number of repetitions in the video matching the code sheet would be recorded in the coding process. Repetition can be defined as 'one type of communication redundancy that involves repeating the same message content in a series of at least two' (Stephens & Rains, 2011, p. 101). It has long been theorised that messages, when repeated, create positive persuasive outcomes (Zajonc, 1968). Therefore, if we consider that each video is a consumer steward's attempt at persuasion, then when applying the codes to the YouTube videos, the key is to indicate what message appeared and count each instance of repetition of the message. This method draws its inspiration from a study by Baker and Curasi (2008) on the frequency of certain words appearing in controlled environments. Thus, the coding for the YouTube video itself could contain any whole number value greater than or equal to 0.

When applying the code table to a YouTube video's comment, the audience's comments were coded with a Boolean value. Since a comment can be positive, negative or not applicable (under each code column), the possible value for each cell could be positive, negative or not applicable, 1, -1 or 0, respectively.

In addition, generic information specific to the videos and comments was also collected. For the video, information such as the date (when the video was made), total views, like count, dislike count, title, total comment count, video description and length, URL links and genre were added. The genres included tutorials, news forums, pro-gameplay and personal gameplay. For the comments on the video, the categories 'comment text', 'reply text' (the comment specifically replied to another comment) and 'likes' (the number of likes a specific comment received) were added.

The aforementioned coding process could be called an 'open coding phase' (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which emphasises linking data with concepts identified in the literature and finding relevant patterns in the video/text. For consumer stewards, the procedure was to watch the YouTube videos they produced and to record when issues relating to the codes appeared in the content. This record also tracked the number of times the same issue was identified. The repeated appearance of the same issue was taken as the level of emphasis from consumer stewards. For consumer stewards' followers, the same procedure was applied, but in this case, the feedback texts were reviewed instead of the videos.

Step 4: Data Collection.

The three selected consumer stewards' YouTube channels contained several hundred videos, with the number of comments for each video ranging from zero to a few thousand. To limit the

research scope to within a manageable parameter, only the first three YouTube videos on the brand (*StarCraft II*) from each year from the YouTube channel's creation to the year 2020 were analysed. Consequently, LowkoTV had 30 videos, PiG had 29 videos and Day9TV had 27 videos. There was no limitation on how long or short the video had to be. This is because, in contrast to the case study presented in Section 3.1: *Good Game* Documentary Review, the data gathered here were not intended to explore consumer stewards' career highlights; rather, they were meant to observe consumer stewards within their own environment. The length of the videos ranged from less than a minute to more than two hours. The only limitation was placed on the comments on each video; only the first 300 comments on each video were coded. This is because the average number of comments per video is 146 (total comments across all three consumer stewards divided by the total number of videos collected). Only 9 videos out of 87 have more than 300 comments, two of which have more than 1,000 comments. Since each video's analysis largely consisted of 'what was consumer stewards' emphasis' vs 'what was the emphasis from followers when they view the video', it was unnecessary to code over 1000 comments when the first 300 comments already provided the data. In addition, since the 300-comment limit cap will only affect 9 out of 87 videos, this study still captured the full comments from 90% of the video selected. In addition, these comments on the videos were only imported once at the time of data collection. Thus any future additional feedback after the data collection was not recorded. This would not affect this study however the data aimed to show how followers responded to (or engaged with) the video rather than whether responses changed over time.

To simplify, the data collection process could be summarized into the following steps, the structure follow the data collection guide described by Cote (2021):

1) Define the Aim: observe and capture interactions between consumer stewards and their fans on YouTube.
2) Define the Subjects: Chosen three consumer stewards (Lowko, PiG and Day9), each represented by their videos and feedback from fans.
3) Define Timeframe: This includes videos from the release of the first consumer steward's YouTube video on StarCraft II up to the year 2020. Only the videos related to the StarCraft II brand were included, and analysis was limited to the first three videos from each year. Additionally, comments collection were limited to the first 300 comments.

4) Collection Methods: Three types of data can be identified which resulting in three collection method: (a) Basic Quantifiable Data on each video, (b) Video Content Interpretation and (c) Feedback Interpretation.
    a. Basic Quantifiable Data
        i. Each video would have basic information such as number of views, number of likes, number of comments, upload dates. A snapshot of these statistics/quantifiable data were captured on April 2020
    b. Video Content Interpretation
        i. Utilize a coding sheet [See Table 3.5] for video content interpretation.
        ii. Watch each video and mark relevant content with an 'X' on the coding sheet.
            Example: If a consumer steward discusses their gaming skills, mark an 'X' under the "Expert" category and the "Refers to own skill, high level of difficulty, and functionality within gameplay" subcategory.
        iii. Tally the frequency of 'X's to gauge the emphasis placed by consumer stewards on specific topics.
    c. Feedback Interpretation
        i. Use the same coding sheet [See Table 3.5] for interpreting fan feedback.
        ii. Read and interpret each comment, marking relevant content with an 'X' on the coding sheet.
            Example: If a fan expresses admiration for the consumer steward, mark an 'X' under the "Referent" category and the "Like the brand (whole or part), like the leader" subcategory.
        iii. Due to the brief nature of comments, refrain from using multiple markings ('X's) within a single box, and do not measure emphasis for comments. However, if the comment received ‘like’ from another audience. Number of ‘like’ will be counted as additional instance of the same comment.
            Example: If a comment express love of the channel, and that comment received 10 ‘like’. Then this comment will be counted 10 + 1 = 11 times with the assumption that 10 additional fans also have

the same comment, but they chose to 'like' an existing comment instead of creating a new but the same comment.

Once data collection is complete, data would undergo data tabulation within excel. Following steps where used in this process:

1) Data Collection: Data on each video contain three types for each consumer steward:
    a. Basic Quantifiable Data for each video
    b. Video Content Interpretation
    c. Feedback Interpretation)
2) Merge Data into Comprehensive table for each consumer steward
    a. Merge the Basic Quantifiable Data (a) with both Video Content Interpretation (b) and Feedback Interpretation (c) data for each consumer steward.
    b. This results in two separate tables for each consumer stewards, one for merged data (a) and (b), and the other for the merged data (a) and (c)
3) Calculate Multiple Correlations
    a. Analyze the correlations between the three datasets (a, b, and c) to compare and contrast their relationships.
    b. Look for any potential influences that consumer stewards may have on their fans.
    c. Determine if these influences correlate with other dimensions of data, such as view count, upload dates, and likes count.

This process created three separate Excel files (see Appendix D.1: LowkoTV, Appendix D.2: PiG and Appendix D.3: Day9TV) were created in Step 4, with all three files following an identical format. The layouts in Excel are described below. Each item can represent one or multiple Excel sheets. It should be noted that more sophisticated online social network analysis tools are available on the market. For example, the NetBase AI studio would simplify the coding and data management process (NetBase Quid, 2023). However, such marketing analysis tools are tailored to business and financial organisations. Hence, the cost of using such a tool was outside the resources assigned to this study.

1. (Lowko/PiG/Day9TV) bio: The background information on consumer stewards/YouTubers in accordance with areas listed in the coding section.

2. Data sheet: A content summary of all the primary data. The coding located above the sheet was set up according to the coding method presented in Section 3.2.3.1: Step 3: Code Construction. Each YouTube video had two rows of data. The first row contains emphasis counts for the YouTuber's message in each video. The second row represents the total number of responses in the comment section for a specific YouTube video. The sources of the numbers were gathered using relative references linking back to each video's data sorting sheet.

3. Original comment data sheets: Named according to the date of the video. For example, a YouTube video created on 3 January 2020 would be named 'Jan 3, 2020 RAW'. These Excel sheets contained the original, unedited and unsorted comments gathered from the source video's comment section.

4. Coding comment data sheets: Named according to the date of the original comment data sheet. For example, the Excel sheet named 'Jan 3, 2020 RAW' was renamed 'Jan 3, 2020'. These Excel sheets had the codes located in the top three rows, and every comment was examined against these codes. Whenever a comment demonstrated a link with the code, the letter 'y' was marked. In addition, this Excel sheet captured the number of likes for each comment. Each like indicated that another person agreed with or supported the originator of the comment. The majority had no likes, but there were a few comments that had many likes. The number of likes was recorded.

5. Count sheets: Named according to the date of the coding comment data sheet. For example, the Excel sheet named 'Jan 3, 2020' was renamed 'Jan 3, 2020 v2'. This sheet employed two Excel functions – the IF() function and the SUMPRODUCT() function – that were applied to the 'y' and the 'number of likes' for each comment. When applied to the 'y' cells, the IF() function changed all cells containing 'y' into '1' and the others into '0'. When applied to 'number of likes', if the cell was originally empty, then the content equalled '1' (representing the original commenter). If not, the value in the cell equalled the number of likes plus 1 (representing both the original commenter and the number of people who conversed with them). Then, the SUMPRODUCT() function was applied to the bottom cell, multiplying each row's number of likes column with each row's coding cell (for example, 1 or 0) and

totalling the figures. This figure represented the number of response counts for each coding, which was then linked to the data sheet.

6. Yearly summary sheet: Named according to the year of the collective data. For example, the videos from Jan 2, 3 and 4 of 2015 were gathered and analysed in the sheet named '2015'. Values were retrieved from the data sheet. Each sheet had videos from that year displayed with their emphasis numbers, the percentage of emphasis numbers against the total emphasis numbers, the response counts and the percentage of the response counts against the total response counts. These values were then gathered into a table with a column header separated into rules and branding using a SUM() function to collect data according to the coding. The row header separated each video into YouTuber and follower. The table was then used to create pie charts for each video to see the emphasis on and responses to rules and branding between YouTubers and followers.
7. Number sheet: Contained data retrieved from the data sheet, but these data were separated into two identical tables. The top table had the coding as column headers and the YouTube video (named by year) as row headers, while the value was the YouTuber's emphasis number. The bottom table was formatted the same but with the value being the follower's response count. These were analysed using a series of Excel functions, such as a pivot table, to explore the relationships between different coding and categorisation within a time series analysis.
8. Percentage sheet: Identical to the number sheet. The only difference was that the value retrieved from the data sheet was converted into a percentage of the total, which aimed to explore a different approach to the data.

Step 5: Data Mining.

The purpose of Step 5 was to identify the most significant themes. There were a total of three dominant themes of significance, with several sub-themes. The three dominant themes were:

1. More emphasis on branding than rules
2. Construction of field and habitus specific to the consumer stewards
3. Consumer stewards' anomalies – highly resonant/high-impact content

The detail of the emergence and in-depth analysis of the themes is presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

Ensuring Ethical Standards.

All data collected were available within the public domain, and all data presented were fairly and accurately reported without manipulation (digital or otherwise). No individual's real name was mentioned or recorded in the analysis. When it was necessary to mention a particular individual, only the screen name or personal brand name was given. For example, Lowko or LowkoTV is the username of a real-life individual. The terms 'Lowko' or 'LowkoTV' were marketed as a personal brand. As a brand community member, the author's interpretation of the data was influenced by their personal knowledge of and immersion in the *StarCraft* brand community.

Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter presents the findings that were derived using the method detailed in Chapter 3. Since the research was separated into a documentary film study and a netnography study, this chapter is separated into two sections, each addressing its respective findings, followed by a summary section at the end.

4.1. *Good Game* Documentary Findings

4.1.1. Overview of the Good Game Documentary

Overall, this documentary makes it clear that just because eSports is about playing video games, it is no less real and no less impactful on people's lives than traditional sports (Ratliff, 2014). The narratives in *Good Game* are cultural products created through the co-creation of the perspectives of many different parties. The identity of IdrA (the main character) and the identities of other athletes revealed in this documentary do not stand alone, as they are social identities that are enriching and sustaining and add value to the brand consumption experience (Seo, 2013). Furthermore, the documentary highlights the delicate relationship consumer stewards (eSport athletes) have with the public (i.e. ordinary consumers) and business owners. The findings presented in this chapter highlight this delicate social position and the effort (i.e. engagement) needed to generate a narrative to create a social identity to occupy this social position. In the following sections, the narratives are considered from three perspectives: a business perspective, a public perspective and an engagement perspective. The reason for these three narratives was that consumer stewards suppose to create values (i.e. business perspective), they occupied an important and influential social position (i.e. public perspective), and the main force behind their rise in popularity was engagement (both their own engagements and their ability to promote engagement from their followers) (i.e. engagement perspective).

4.1.2. The Business Perspective

To quote Scott in the *Good Game* documentary, 'We run a business; we don't run on charity; we run on profit' (Ratliff, 2014, 00:35:00). From a business perspective, not every part of an athlete (i.e. consumer steward) can create value. In fact, what players and fans believe to be important to eSport may not be important from a business perspective. This was the case with Jacob, an athlete covered in the film. According to an interviewee, fans thought Jacob was not worthy of being on the same team as IdrA because they kept losing. The other teammates even said to the camera: '[Jacob] is not a tournament winner … not a high place finisher' (Ratliff, 2014, 00:05:00), but Scott 'SirScoots' Smith, Chief Operating Officer of EG (eSports team owner),

said that '[Jacob] is absolutely worthy of our rank. He got this Louisiana charm to him, which makes him a fan favourite' (Ratliff, 2014, 00:05:30).

From this, two issues can be highlighted. First, business owners, such as the owner of the eSport team mentioned in the *Good Game* documentary, greatly influence the success or failure of an athlete since they have to recognise a person's worth before spending money on marketing the individual. Second, one determination of a person's worth is the successful construction of a personal brand (i.e. social identity), which drives both marketing and consumers. This value creation elevates an individual's social status to one of consumer steward because by imbuing these individuals' identities with the brand, they transform the identities into social and cultural products, thereby increasing their value.

Two quotes can be used to highlight the value of successful personal branding. First is a quote by IdrA, who commented on viewership and followings and how they have almost nothing to do with how good one is at eSports:

> Viewership rewards entertainment, not results. Top [South] Koreans can stream with less than 500 viewers, whereas me, not winning a tournament in months and months and not even performing practically well, and in anything else, I can stream and get 10,000 viewers. Being a personality, hav[ing] a following, and being interesting, that's just what viewers watch. (Ratliff, 2014, 00:11:00)

The second quote refers to one of IdrA's teammates, Geoff 'iControl' Robinson, the captain of the team and a unique opposite to IdrA. While IdrA was aggressive and rude, Geoff was an extremely good communicator and positive in their approach. According to Anna, the PR manager for EG:

> [Geoff] is approachable at the same time as being exciting; he is someone people can relate to but also look up to. So because of that, I firmly believe he is one of the most marketable and valuable people in eSports right now as [a] personality, and not because he is a player, not because he is a caster, not because what he can say about the game, but simply because of his personality and how marketable that is. (Ratliff, 2014, 00:19:00)

This sentiment reflects the personal branding literature discussed in earlier chapters (Young, 2009b). In addition to skill in eSports, the success and popularity of eSports athletes depends on their branding. The case of Jacob (Ratliff, 2014) demonstrated that his "Louisiana charm" (i.e. personal branding) was more important than his competitive skill, making him a valuable member of the team. His value, in fact, was linked to his personal branding than his

skill. This seemed to suggest his economic capital for the team are linked to his social capital (Bourdieu, 1984), which was linked to his referent power over his fans (French & Raven, 1959. Testimonies from IdrA and the PR manager for EG on Geoff also spoke to the power of impression management (Schneider, 1981), which suggests that the competitive nature of eSports takes a back seat to the importance of managing one's image.

4.1.3. The Public Perspective

Pro-gamers are celebrities in their respective fields. From a fan/public perspective, celebrity worship is commonly a one-sided relationship between celebrities and fans (Alperstein, 1991). One common sign of idol worship was when bad conduct was excused and reasoned away. In contrast, the same conduct by a regular consumer would not have been easily forgiven (Giles, 2000). For example, in the *Good Game* documentary's fan interview, IdrA's provocative behaviour was forgiven and taken as honesty rather than rude.

However, the film made it clear that such referent power was not bestowed upon IdrA easily. IdrA needed to construct a narrative that acted as a bridge between them and their fans. At the start of the documentary, IdrA said that what really mattered was their skill as a pro-gamer rather than their personality, ethics or manners. In reality, the documentary showed that precisely the opposite is true. IdrA had such a big fan base because of their narrative identity, which developed from their provocative personality. When interviewed, the fans said, 'He sounds like a real person' or 'He tells it how it is' (Ratliff, 2014, 00:02:40).

In fact, even at the end of IdrA's career as an athlete, their earlier narrative/personal branding was the only thing that kept their followers from leaving them. In the last recorded communication to his fans, IdrA highlighted that this relationship they and their fans had was all that kept them going. In terms of this research, it also highlighted what happens when the relationship between consumer stewards and their fans is correctly managed. The following quote was used at the end of the film:

> [The fans were] generally quite kind and supportive; that actually kind of shocked me because I kind of have a very vocal anti-fan base. People who don't like me are very, very passionate about not liking me. That is generally what I hear. They are the loud ones. The people that are actual fans, I was genuinely shocked to see how much positive support came out when I made that tweet [about leaving EG], and when I discussed other things I would be doing. And so I really didn't get to appreciate them enough or even realize they existed [to] the extent that they do… or at least I forgot they existed. I would

> like to give a very big thank you to all of them; they definitely make sure it was the right decision to stay within eSport. (Ratliff, 2014, 01:06:00)

This final quote in the film contrasted the quote by IdrA at the beginning of the documentary to show the importance of brand community to consumer stewards:

Athletes shouldn't be role models, [and] neither should we. We are here because we are good at [a] game … that doesn't say anything about your personalit[y], your ethics, morals, anything like that. When it comes right down to it, I am here because of the competition. I like beating people. (Ratliff, 2014, 00:00:10)

The way people viewed IdrA's career is a practical example of how narrative identities are created. Just like Aterianus-Owanga (2015) described the 'African identity' and Garthwaite (2015) studied the long identity of disabled benefit recipients, IdrA's narrative identity is also constructed and reconstructed over time. This narrative can change depending on how one interprets the influences of life (Weiss, 2002). When IdrA was defeated and subsequently withdrew from competitive eSport, his narrative was interpreted in a way that created sympathy and support from the community instead of a negative interpretation. While social identity is reactive (Popescu, 2019), the difference between consumer steward (in this case IdrA) and other consumers (IdrA's fans) was that he actively shaped his narrative identity, which in turn influenced his fans' social identity (McCreery & Best, 2004).

4.1.4. The Engagement Perspective

To obtain recognition from the business owner or gain acceptance by the brand community, consumer stewards have to work hard. Throughout the film, athletes' hard work behind the scenes (i.e. engagement) was repeatedly highlighted. The notion that everything the public sees is only a small portion of what consumer stewards do was outlined early on. To quote the words of the chief executive officer of EG:

People have this vision of [a] sponsor tak[ing] interest in you, and walk[ing] over to you, tap[ping] you on the shoulder [and] want[ing] to offer you money, to put a logo on your shirt, and use their product. It's not like that at all… [The] 'players being at [a] tournament' part of things is, like, less than 10 percent [of] what actually gets us sponsorship. Which is not how it should be. It should be like 90 percent of it. But you know we do things like consulting, we design marketing campaign[s], we run social networking for companies, we create videos [and] we run social broadcastings, video live streams. (Ratliff, 2014, 00:48:30)

On an individual level, the nine pro-gamers in the documentary became experts of the game and gained recognition for their professionalism through gruelling training sessions. In the documentary, the following point was made:

It is really tough, because in this kind of job, or if you really want to call it a job. You will do as well compare to how much you too into it. Like if you put into a lot of time and effort, you will get better return if you treated it as a normal job, like say 'Hey, I am only going to play 6 to 10 hours a day, and I am just going to not worry about the game.' So the more you commit to the job, the better you will do. (Ratliff, 2014, 00:39:00)

Many of the pro-gamers had to make sacrifices that had untold effects on their social status and trajectory. This can be seen in the fall of IdrA covered in the film. In 2011, EG was invited to participate in Major League Gaming against South Korean players. At the tournament, IdrA lost. However, IdrA did not lose because they were less skilled; rather, they lost because they lacked the mental fortitude to play under pressure. Anna, EG's PR manager, provided an interesting window into IdrA's mindset: 'My guess why [IdrA] gets so passionately upset or passionately happy is because [*StarCraft*] matters so much in his life. Its not like if he lost his touch, if he couldn't cut it anymore, he can run back to some 9[am] to 5[pm] job, he could go finish school, or its not like he has a plan B. *StarCraft* is his plan' (Ratliff, 2014, 01:04:20).

This sacrifice emphasized a crucial distinction between consumer stewards and other consumer groups, which was the level of their engagement. In the literature, the discussion on identity formation already emphasized that becoming a consumer steward requires a certain level of emotional investment (Koetz & Tankersley, 2016) and engagement (Kates, 2002). In the case of eSport athletes, no only there are sacrifice, but such sacrifice for, commitment to and engagement with the brand were not forced upon the players by the *StarCraft II* brand. It was the players (consumers), in this case, the pro-gamers (consumer stewards), who willingly established this culture and experience of *StarCraft II* and defined its cultural value. By the same token, the cultural value held by the brand was clearly enough to motivate consumer stewards to engage in brand activities, which allowed these consumer stewards to obtain capital (Bourdieu, 2011) and power (French & Raven, 1959), thus changing their social trajectory.

4.1.5. Summary of the Good Game Findings

Personal branding, narrative creation, and engagement, these formed a triad force that drove the success of consumer stewards. The documentary provided an important behind-the-scenes account of how eSports athletes (i.e. consumer stewards) operate at a business/enterprise level

by manage their brand. The insights into the business perspective are invaluable. From a research practicality point of view, these business owners would be challenging to reach and conduct one-on-one interviews. The interview they provided in the documentary made it clear that the business owner's views and values directly shaped the way various consumer stewards constructed their narratives and how they were marketed.

To the film's credit, while the business perspective took priority, it demonstrated that consumer stewards have to maintain a good relationship with their fans in the form of narrative construction. These narratives require high levels of engagement from consumer stewards. The film emphasised that such engagement may require consumer stewards to make personal sacrifices and commitments, such as giving up their education early on, which meant if they retired from eSport, they would lack the education qualification to pursue other careers. Indeed, the word 'sacrifice' was rarely seen in the existing literature because online celebrities are usually successful. The case of IdrA in the documentary was a rare instance where the audience contemplated the sacrifice a consumer steward has to make and what happens if their effort is not successful. This finding can be displayed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Good Game Documentary Review Finding Summary

Perspective	Finding
Business Perspective	Business Owner shape how Consumer Stewards construct their narrative
Public Perspective	Consumer Stewards must maintain and manage their relationship with their followers through brand management
Engagement Perspective	Consumer stewards require High-Level of engagement to maintain their possess, this engagement does not only mean commitment to the profession, but it may also means personal sacrifice

4.2. Netnography Findings

4.2.1. Overview of Netnography on Three Consumer Stewards

The netnographic method applied to the data on the three consumer stewards (PiG, Lowko and Day9) allowed the generation of various themes. The three dominant thematic lenses were:

a. More emphasis on branding than rules

b. The construction of field and habitus specific to consumer stewards (i.e. actively engage with the relevant social sphere)

c. Consumer stewards' points of interest/highlights – highly resonant/high-impact content (i.e. narrative unique for individual consumer steward)

The first theme (more emphasis on branding than rules) and the second theme (the construction of field and habitus specific to consumer stewards) emerged from the finding that consumer stewardship is a strategic form of identity creation. The identity of consumer stewards is structured actively through personal branding and impression management (Schneider, 1981). Within the YouTube social platform, these branding processes are expressed through videos. Indeed, each video represents an insight into consumer stewards' attempts at personal brand-building. This enables each consumer steward to curate the specificity of their own identity based on their respective competencies, such as previous player status, avid fan or expert, all of which form foundations for the ascent as a consumer steward within the community. This specificity of identity construction based on the steward's particular claim to legitimacy was highlighted when we compared each consumer steward's background.

Lowko is a pure YouTuber because they started to build their personal brand on YouTube and then branched out into other media platforms, such as Twitch. Lowko was around 17–18 years old when they first created their YouTube channel, four and six years younger than the others. Lowko was never a professional *StarCraft II* player, although they were an above-average amateur gamer (Liquipedia, 2020c). As such, the tone of Lowko's videos was crafted as relatable and friendly. Indeed, Lowko was the only one of the three consumer stewards to have a catchphrase: 'Don't forgot to smile, alright'. This branding was both engagement towards his fandoms but also suitable to his social sphere. It was so successful, that the positive message in his branding was not missed by either their followers or the *StarCraft II* brand owner (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019).

PiG was a pro-gamer athlete who played for an eSports team and participated in official eSports tournaments. PiG was also an official commentator for *StarCraft II* for many years and is still hired by the *StarCraft II* tournament as one of its English-speaking commentators (Liquipedia, 2020c). Due to their background and status as an expert, their YouTube videos are typically composed of tutorials and gameplay footage of themselves winning. This allows PiG to utilise their skill and knowledge as a lever to build personal brand identity. Hence, PiG has been effective in exercising their informational and expert power.

Day9, although in possession of high-level skills, never established himself as an eSports athlete. Instead, Day9 was a professional caster who, by 2009, had cast hundreds of official *StarCraft II* tournaments long before PiG was invited as an official caster. Day9 remains an active caster for the *StarCraft* tournament. Their YouTube channels are famous for the 'Day9 Daily' series, which allows Day9 to demonstrate their insight into *StarCraft* games through the analysis of pro-level games and tutorials (Liquipedia, 2020a). Sports commentators require abundant information, knowledge and charisma or referent power to be successful (Jenkins, 2000). Day9 has successfully created a charismatic personal brand, with fans eager to be identified as part of their tribe. Fans' affection for Day9 is more intense than that shown towards the other stewards, as indicated in comments such as 'Day[9] Have My Babies!' and 'Awesome hair today [Day9]!' (Day9TV, 2020).

By matching each consumer steward's background and identity against how their tribe members respond, the source of their differences became apparent. We observed that each consumer steward draws upon diverse forms of legitimate power to accumulate capital, thereby creating different habitus and fields unique to their audience and community behaviour. Underpinning their different approaches is a common method of developing a distinct identity and using that identity to create a reality absorbed by their fans to achieve increased economic capital via their sponsorship and product promotion opportunities.

4.2.2. Points of Interest/Highlights – Highly Resonant/High-Impact Content

The first two themes direct the attention to the more generic ways stewards emerge as community leaders. However, levers are also available to generate high social (and economic) capital and to develop consumer stewards as *reality-builders* for their fans. These levers include specific content or events that stand out as seminal moments for the construction of stewards' identities. These high-impact moments are described here as points of interest/highlights because they describe a highlight or significant moment in a steward's career when they could capitalise on some drama or a particular event to either build or realign their identity. According to the third theme indicated in the analysis, various points of interest were identified. These points continued the same identity constructions previously identified. If we consider the first two themes to isolate the broad strategy through which consumer stewards develop their identity, we can consider these points of interest to be a more nuanced interpretation of how their identities are individually curated. Most importantly, they also demonstrate what happens when identity management is done effectively within a consumer community, for example, gaining multiple forms of power and capital.

4.2.2.1. Lowko's Highlights: The Narrative of 'Your Friendly Amateur Gamer Becoming Everyone's Friend'.

Video Sep 20, 2011 was the first video on Lowko's channel. The comments for this video included many signs of idol worship for an individual who enjoyed high social capital within the community, for example, '0:00 a legend was born' and '0:00 here, the legend of the boy called Lowko born' (LowkoTV, 2020b). From these quotes, it is evident that there is a group of hardcore fans around Lowko (as an acknowledged member of the community), as a high engagement level is needed for a member of the fandom to seek out the life history of their idol.

Video Jan 6, 2014 was a tutorial video on an easy strategy to win *StarCraft II* games, even against more highly skilled players. Since this strategy appealed to audiences across varying skill levels and was easy to replicate, many adopted this insight as one of their winning formulas. This was a clear acknowledgement of Lowko's expert power among his fans. In the comments, there were comments such as 'Holy crap my game has improved so much from just doing this a few times haha. I'm getting the concept of build orders now finally. Cheers! :D' (LowkoTV, 2020b). As such, one clear result of this consumer steward's video was an increase in their tribe's overall engagement with the brand.

Video Jan 4, 2018 was a fan-submitted game to Lowko that used a rarely seen tactic to win. Though it is difficult to know how many fans submitted gameplay Lowko would receive, judging from over 500 thousand subscribers on YouTube alone, the number must be considerable. From these submissions, Lowko had to review these submissions and select the ones that had entertainment value, this required skill and knowledge of his fan base and community interest. This can be seen as another demonstration of expert power: the knowledge of what would generate entertainment value and, by extension, accumulate capital for consumer stewards. More importantly, this particular highlight and the subsequent capital it generated demonstrated Lowko's social capital and Lowko fandom's engagement level. The amateur gameplay that was showcased was submitted to Lowko's official contact address by a fan. Let us consider the average engagement level of YouTube viewership (for example, only 2% of all viewers would bother to click 'like/dislike'). In comparison to the action of clicking 'like/dislike', going through the trouble of emailing a saved gameplay file can be considered a Herculean task. On top of that, it would be optimistic to assume that every one of the submitted files could appeal to the greater public. Hence, the fact that Lowko was able to obtain such a valuable submission from a fan shows both the size and engagement level of their brand tribe and the high social capital it can offer its possessor.

4.2.2.2. PiG's Highlights: The Narrative of 'I Am the Best, a Knight in Shining Armour'.

Table 4.2 is a list of PiG's highlights, including video dates and titles:

Table 4.2

PiG's Highlight Videos

Date	Title
Jan 1, 2018	PiG Drops Avilo | Battling Avilo #8
Jan 11, 2016	Squashing Avilo | Battling Avilo #5
Feb 18, 2014 #2	Murdering Avilo | Battling Avilo #1

The common thread across these three videos was PiG challenging another player, Avilo. PiG was aware of the entertainment value of beating this person, as the theme generated at least eight videos. As a person of interest, Avilo was another *StarCraft II* content creator who mainly operated on Twitch (a live streaming platform). He was infamous for his bad sportsmanship within the community. Comments from PiG's tribe described Avilo in the following ways:

He basically rages every time he plays the game. His ego is reaching the top of the fucking Burj Khalifa. He is always trash talking other people, getting paranoid when he loses his games and is overall a shitty person. Quick description just 4u. (PiG, 2020)

Yeah he's basically just got an incredibly bad personality, rage and screaming on stream, trash talk, anyone he loses against is map hacking or stream sniping, thinks pro gamers are copying his strategies and builds, etc. (PiG, 2020)

As a result of Avilo's bad reputation, the community liked it when they saw someone beating them. The comments for these three videos mainly either condemned Avilo or praised PiG to the point of idol worship. For example: 'I like that you can tell PiGs improving. Each upload of time he beats avilo is shorter. Some of the older ones are an hour+', 'The downside is the better pig gets the less time of him stomping avilo we get :(' and 'Pig has 100% win rate against Avilo. LoL' (PiG, 2020).

It should also be noted that just because Avilo had a bad reputation within the *StarCraft II* community does not mean Avilo was not popular. On the contrary, their provocative manner was what attracted fans' attention. There were also questions from PiG's fans who wanted to see more Avilo streams in the comments. Table 4.3 contains one of many examples.

Table 4.3

PiG's Video Comments Selection

Fan A	Someone make a playlist games with Avilo freak-outs.
Reply from Fan B	Just watch his stream for like 10 minutes and you should see it.
Reply from Fan C	I made a playlist of random rages I found online. I'm sure more will come up lol.
Reply from Fan D	https://clips.twitch.tv/avilo/GoodChinchillaBloodTrail His stream tonight was full of rage. Uncharacteristically so, really.

Two points can be taken from this thread. First, it agrees with the observation from the literature review that consumer stewards can accumulate influence and capital through the use of provocative mannerisms and words (Steinmetz, 2018). Avilo was one such person. In the literature, this behaviour was criticised for inciting violence in the community. However, what we see here is community members moderating the presence of Avilo: on the one hand, accepting Avilo's presence (and even laughing at his controversial behaviour) while, on the other hand, expecting/anticipating/requesting action from others (e.g. other consumer stewards) that could challenge Avilo's behaviour. Dramatically, this was the old tale of good versus evil; by beating Avilo in games, PiG painted himself as the knight in shining armour. To approach this in another way, this was a classic case of using another a person's referent power to boost one's own social capital. The difference, in this case, was that rather than attracting those who liked Avilo, PiG was able to attract people who disliked Avilo.

The second notion concerns the establishing of rules and behaviours for the consumer stewards' tribe. If the case of PiG versus Avilo was indeed a tale of good versus evil, then by beating Avilo, PiG picked the side of good. In a classic fairy tale, if one identifies as good, one is essentially typecast and held to high standards as the keeper of the integrity of the community. The PiG versus Avilo example was another case of identity/impression management (Schneider, 1981). While demonstrating that they were superior in terms of expert power, PiG implicitly framed their identity in opposition to Avilo's identity as a villain. Indeed, during the videos, not once did PiG refer to their own personality or behaviour. Merely standing against Avilo and winning the game spoke volumes about what type of person PiG was. In addition, this clearly showed how the reality created by a consumer steward establishes the rules and tone within their tribe.

These three videos hinted at one message: ‘Everything Avilo is not, I am. If you don’t like Avilo and what he represents, then you will like me’. This echoes the existing literature on identity and identity management, that is, how a person’s reputation is constructed and reconstructed by what or whom they do or do not associate with (Sigamoney, 2016).

4.2.2.3. Day9’s Highlights: The Narrative of ‘The Old Timer Full of Wisdom and Memory’. In video Jan 2, 2011, Day9 launched a video similar to Lowko’s Jan 4, 2018 video, in which a rarely used strategy in amateur-level games was played out. This, like Lowko’s video, was submitted by Day9’s fandom and was able to generate considerable entertainment value and attract a significant number of viewers. Without taking other highlights’ view counts into the equation, the percentage difference between this video’s view count and the average view count was a remarkable 311% increase. However, what was different about this video compared to Lowko’s was that unlike the unplanned amateur game submission in Lowko’s video, Day9’s was a planned event. This video’s title was *Starcraft 2 Day[9] Daily #227 – Funday Monday – Battle Cruisers!* Two things can be gleaned from this title alone. First, there is a clear indication of the consumer steward’s accomplishment, that is, engagement with the brand. 2011 was the second year of Day9’s YouTube channel, and they already had at least 227 videos of *StarCraft II* content. Second, the key term ‘Funday Monday’ was used. In the video, Day9 explained that they would put out challenges to the *StarCraft II* community every Monday under the title of ‘Funday Monday’. These challenges generally consisted of winning the game in a particular and sometimes humorous way. Anyone who completed the challenges could send in their game(s) replay as proof, and Day9 would choose the most entertaining video to be featured in the following Monday’s video.

This form of engagement also demonstrated the class-level difference between Day9 and their followers. Day9 was the upper class, giving out tasks every week, and the lower class (i.e. his followers) would complete the tasks. The other two consumer stewards saw this assertion of power by directly influencing fans’ behaviour through tutorials or coaching videos. Nevertheless, Day9 was the only one to position themself as a teacher and arbiter of fan behaviours. They gave out homework and fully expected their students, or at least some of them, to complete it. This confidence in their own social influence speaks volumes about Day9’s self-perceived social position in the community.

Video Jul 23, 2019 was another unique case because it was a memorial video to a *StarCraft II* pro-gamer and caster who tragically had passed away days before the video was made. The individual who had passed away was Geoff ‘iControl’ Robinson, one of the people featured and

quoted in the *Good Game* documentary film review. This video had the second-highest view count in the dataset and the highest number of likes and comments. The previous discussion illuminated how individual stewards create a reality or field through their identity (Aterianus-Owanga, 2015). Here, we see something unique, namely, the disappearance of a consumer steward and the reality/tribe they created. This perspective was interesting in the sense that most Bourdieusian literature focused on the formation and operation of fields and habitus, whereas, in this case, the field and habitus were in a state of deconstruction or dissipation (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). Contrary to the field and habitus in the Bourdieusian framework, the field of brand tribes is created by individuals. Day9, and many of their fans, also being part of the field created by iControl, showed a physical and emotional reaction to iControl's passing in the form of tears. The sense of a world crumbling around them was ever-present in both the video and the comments.

However, this 'crumbling' did not mean that the pieces of iControl's world would fade away. On the contrary, community members who originally formed part of iControl's tribe also watched this video to pay their respects to their idol. This was evident from the incredible number of views, likes and comments the video generated. Without taking other highlights' view counts into the equation, the percentage difference between this video's view count and the average view count was a huge 607% increase. Thus, we witnessed parts of iControl's tribe being reabsorbed and becoming part of other consumer stewards' tribes. Whether this was Day9's intention or not, the effect was that, by associating with another popular member in the community, their own popularity was inevitably elevated. Arguably, such a boost in popularity can be effective at the time of a popular individual's passing because instead of trying to share followers between consumer stewards, this was a takeover of the followers left behind.

If the tragic death of iControl demonstrates how a consumer steward can absorb another's field, then the remaining highlights of Day9 demonstrate how resilient a field can be, even when a creator leaves the community for an extended period. After 2015, Day9 reduced their production of *StarCraft*-related content. In 2016 and 2019, only one video was created for each year. The reason behind this was financial. A regular game of *StarCraft* takes 20 to 40 minutes to play, and it takes much longer to make a video about each game. In comparison, many other games only take 10 to 15 minutes. In this sense, Day9 could create more videos if they played other games, meaning that they could generate more cultural capital that could be exchanged for more economic and social capital. Ironically, this withdrawal was what created the highlights for the videos Mar 15, 2020, Aug 6, 2016, Jun 4, 2015 #1 and even, to a certain extent, Jul 23, 2019.

Table 4.4

Day9's Video Comments Selection

Fan A	I miss Day[9] talking about StarCraft/StarCraft 2 strats. Bring back Funday Monday!
Reply from Fan B	I wish that it would come back too, but I think it required an absolutely insane amount of work behind the scenes.
Reply from Fan C	[Fan B] from what I understand, prepping for SC2 episodes took way more time and it wasn't garnering enough viewership than other stuff that took less time, but has twice the viewership results. But it doesn't explain why he's doesn't play or even co-host major tournaments anymore.
Reply from Fan D	I honestly miss dearly Day[9] daily... I know it's a lot of commitment... But a Day[9] weekly, or heck, even a monthly I would LOVE. Whether Funday Monday, Noobie Tuesday or just an analysis of a pro-game. [Day9] if you read this... Consider doing it once a blue moon. I miss that kind of content especially for SC/SC2. <3
Reply from Fan C	[Fan E] he could at LEAST stream the ladder or something once in a while even if he doesn't wanna do the replay reviews, but oh well.
Reply from Fan E	[Fan B] He's not going to stream ladder, Sean is a bit self conscious and I don't know if you've ever read the chat when someone is streaming SC2 but people are complete dicks and hyper critical which I'm sure [Day9] doesn't enjoy.
Reply from Fan F	Luckily our community doesn't have such toxicity and I can help those that do learn how we do things should they show up in chat. The main reason for the shift from Starcraft content is time and focus. The dailies took an insane amount of time it took to produce the content and also demanded an all consuming approach to the Starcraft scene as a whole in order to produce such in-depth content. After so many years

	of dedicated himself to Starcraft as both a player and as a content creator, Sean (at least for now) wants to focus on enjoying it a viewer/consumer while exploring all that he missed in that dedication time period. I hope this helps to clear up the questions or misconceptions surrounding his shift in content.
Reply from Fan G	Hell bring back the daily--- that shit was amazing. Day9 was the first person that made me realize people could stream content. He was the first streamer for me.
Reply from Fan H	PiG does something similar for sc2

Since Day9 had a large fan base in the *StarCraft* community, the lack of regular *StarCraft* content left fans starving for it. As a result, every time Day9 put out a video related to *StarCraft*, his fans would drive views unusually high. The comments for these videos were filled with pleas for Day9 to return to *StarCraft*. Table 4.4 presents a small sample of their fans' testimonies.

What was interesting about this conversation was that it was packed with a rich subtext of messages and meaning. Of course, there were accusations and complaints, but there were also fans trying to defend their idol with great effort (for example, the number of words used) or reflecting on Day9's point of view. There was also a reference to other consumer stewards (for example, PiG), indicating the mosaic nature of the community and the interconnected status of the different stewards.

This highlights the importance of identity and identity management within consumer stewards' operations. First, consumer stewards use identity to create an individual field and habitus within the consumer setting. As a result, every action of consumer stewards becomes part of the norms in this reality field. If consumer stewards ever seek to change their identity, this could create resistance from fans because it would be seen as inconsistent with their identity (Barron, 2007; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). However, the data also suggest that while stewards may encounter initial resistance to divergences in their behaviour, such resistance can reduce over time. The most effective way for a steward to weather the initial community reaction is to leverage loyal fans who will defend their idol whenever they can. These fans work in contrast to traditional fans who demand old content. Such traditionalists demonstrate this desire by increasing their engagement level whenever old content appears. Of course, some fans see it as betrayal and actively move away, sometimes even suggesting that others move away as well. Thus, consumer

stewards must carefully manage any changes in their identity and utilise their residual capital within their community base to ameliorate risk. Loyal fans can buffer against the loss of capital and steady a steward's power base in times of turmoil.

4.2.3. Summary of Netnography Findings

This section provides a granular account of the three theme identified through the data analysis process: (1) more emphasis on branding than rules (i.e. personal branding), (2) the construction of field and habitus specific to consumer stewards (i.e. engagement) and (3) consumer stewards' points of interest/highlights – highly resonant/high-impact content (i.e. narrative creation). Miller and Howell (2005) suggest that engagement involves intentional or planned behavior. In the case of Lowko, PiG, and Day9, their creation of video content online clearly had a purpose behind it, which is evident through the narrative they built. The fan response from their followers clearly indicates that their narrative identity (McCreery & Best, 2004) constructs a social sphere around them as consumer stewards, which has a significant impact on anyone's social identity who comes into contact with it (Popescu, 2019). This helps to establish their personal branding (Young, 2009b) and places them as part of the dominant class (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978).

By in-depth examine these three themes, the understanding of how consumer stewards generate social and economic capital within the context of an online consumer community became clearer. In particular, with correct identity management and narrative creation, consumer stewards can control the field (for example, their reality), facilitate their own habits and accumulate power. The data indicated that consumer stewards operate by first creating their personal field and habitus based on their specific form of legitimacy within the community, for example, background, expertise and experience. Each video then becomes a chance for identity management, which establishes the norms or rules of the game for the consumer stewards' tribe or the habitus the stewards expect from the tribe. This finding echoes the existing literature this study used to theorise the notion of consumer stewards (see Section 2.2.1: Pierre Bourdieu's Social Theory).

The data also indicated that this habitus is not unchangeable; however, change must be managed carefully with one's followers (for example, explaining multiple times why change needs to happen), and it takes time for the community, as a whole, to accept change. Since a brand community's social hierarchy is arranged in terms of one's engagement and credibility, having created one's own field and habitus implicitly confers a high social status upon stewards. Each steward must have successfully created their personal brand to generate a social reality big enough to encompass a massive follower base.

Each video can be seen as an instance where creative capital is transformed into other forms of capital and power, like loyalty, legitimacy, referent, economic and social capital. Through this exchange, we see that stewards' social capital increases, along with other forms of capital and power. It should be noted, though, that the actual size of a consumer steward's core tribe is often smaller than it would appear. However, the influence of a consumer steward certainly extends beyond their hardcore fan group. Unfortunately, it was outside the scope of this study to trace the extent to which consumer stewards' influence reaches beyond the identified community.

Finally, when a consumer steward disappears from the community, the field left behind does not disappear. Reality is always a shared product of social interaction (Watson, 2009). Thus, when consumer stewards disappear, their fields are absorbed by other stewards who share similar social/community spaces and values.

4.3. Findings Summary

The two sets of findings generated by the film study and the netnographic study presented the concept of consumer stewards from two angles. The documentary film can be seen as a top-down approach to consumer stewards' operations. It highlighted the business perspective, the narrative that was guided by this perspective to please the public and the engagement (sacrifices and commitments made) by consumer stewards. The netnographic study can be seen as a bottom-up approach to consumer stewards' operations. This research gathered data on the audience's perspective by observing the messages from consumer stewards in their videos and the feedback from followers of these stewards. The relationship between consumer stewards and ordinary consumers was highlighted. Indeed, each highlight or point of interest revealed in the data was created through the successful management of this relationship. The result was massive viewership and engagement from followers.

Chapter 5. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter presents the analysis of the data presented in Chapter 4 and discusses the findings in order to answer the three research questions and add new insights to the existing literature. The three research questions are:

1. What are the practices of consumer stewards within the context of an online consumer community?
2. What are the constraining or enabling factors/rules within community norms and behaviours that govern consumer stewards' practices?
3. How do consumer stewards evolve our understanding of online community, social hierarchy and consumer-generated value?

In order to answer these questions, this chapter is divided into two sections: Analysis and Discussion. The research method was composed of two methodologies, a documentary film study and a netnographic approach, to study consumer stewards in the eSport community. Therefore, the Analysis section is divided into two parts to address the findings produced by each methodology. The Discussion section addresses the three research questions and discusses the insights that emerged from the analysis.

5.1. Analysis

5.1.1. Analysis of Good Game Data

The central focus of the *Good Game* documentary was the unique position eSport athletes (i.e. consumer stewards) occupy between the company on one side and the public on the other. This unique position is presented through the identity constructed by those eSport athletes. While consumer stewards create their own identity, it is also shaped by the views of the public as well as the brand owner. In Chapter 4, it was showed that the data could be separated into three perspectives: the business perspective, the public perspective and the engagement perspective.

5.1.1.1. Public Perspective Analysis. By observing the relationship between the public and eSport athletes, it showed the relationship between consumer stewards and their followers. In particular, it was shown that one crucial part of this relationship is for consumer stewards to be seen by the public as one-of-us. IdrA's provocative personality was emphasised over the course of the film. The perception from the public was that 'He sounds like a real person' and 'He tells it how it is' (Ratliff, 2014, 00:02:40). In short, IdrA was perceived as a real person, one that they can trust, and speak their language. This is strikingly similar to how Donald Trump won the US election. In a Fox News interview with the famous Judge Judy

during the election campaign of 2015–16, Judge Judy said to the reporter: 'The truthfulness, the candour and the directness of his speeches worked … [People] are hungry for plain speak, and Donald is a plain speaker' (Judy, 2015). Like Trump, who was able to create the image of a 'superhero anti-politician celebrity' (Schneiker, 2019, p. 210), IdrA used their personality and mannerisms to create a powerful narrative about themself.

This notion of constructing a hero figure who is one with the public and for the public was often used tactic in regards to brand building. Marketing agents often imbue brands with human or human-like characteristics in order to develop image-related and attitudinal associations in the awareness of consumers (Keller, 1993, p. 11). Aiken et al. (2013) looked at 10 National Football League teams and their respective homes and found that there was a strong correlation between how fans perceived a sports team and their city, with generally similar traits being ascribed to both. 'People frequently see a team as a reflection of the city in which they play' (Aiken et al., 2013, p. 10). The result of this association could be associated to fans' ability to form relationships with their teams that transcend the game itself. If we were to employ the concepts of capital from Bourdieu (2011), then a brand, imbued with other characteristics, can become a cultural and even social product with the right narrative.

Another example of brand building a consumer steward as a hero can be seen in the short documentary *The Foreigner*, directed by Jonathan Sutak (2015). This 24-minute-long film focuses on the *StarCraft II* tournament hosted in 2013, the same MGL tournament that marked the fall of IdrA examined in *Good Game* (Ratliff, 2014). This documentary detailed the background of South Korea's superiority over the rest of the world. The title, *The Foreigner*, illustrates the fact that South Koreans are known to be the best in the world at the game – they were so good that they called the rest of the world 'foreigners' (Sutak, 2015). Thus, human traits such as national pride and the right to challenge the strong are imbued into the brand, ultimately generating audience interest that feeds back into the popularity of related branding and eSports in general.

A powerful narrative allows a celebrity's fans to remember who the celebrity is. McGinnis and Glibkowski (2019) carried out a study on how a celebrity brand stands the test of time. In particular, they looked at Bruce Springsteen, singer, songwriter and one of the best-known figures in the history of rock and roll. According to McGinnis and Glibkowski (2019), the reason Bruce Springsteen, as a brand, has survived the test of time and continues to gather fans to the present day is because 'narratology and authenticity'. Narratology is composed of a story (what and why) and discourse (how, when, where and who; Glibkowski et al., 2014, p. 239).

Authenticity can be defined as the perception of the fan that the celebrity behaves according to their image/persona (Moulard et al., 2015). In the case of Bruce Springsteen, McGinnis and Glibkowski (2019, p. 414) found that the narrative of Springsteen's celebrity brand was consistent and interesting (e.g. an underdog story), which was sufficient to echo within their fandom. Meanwhile, Springsteen never acted outside their character; for example, even with all their wealth and international commercial success, Springsteen continued to perform for their audience with the same style as before: 'exciting and authentic, and devoid of glamor' (McGinnis & Glibkowski, 2019, p. 422).

5.1.1.2. Engagement Perspective Analysis. To construct an identity that is authentic and imbued with characteristics that the public favour, a high level of engagement and sacrifice is required on the part of consumer stewards. The findings demonstrated the hardships and sacrifices each eSports athlete had to make and what hard future awaits them if they fail, for example, the situation of IdrA, who had no plan or other qualification if he failed at eSport (Ratliff, 2014). However, regardless of the success or failure of their career as eSports athletes, consumer stewards' engagement promotes engagement from their followers. In the documentary, IdrA was both the top dog of western eSports and the underdog who intended to challenge the supremacy of Korean eSports (Sutak, 2015). Unfortunately, IdrA lost the match against the Korean players, but the documentary showed that in the two years (2011–2013) that IdrA was at a low point in their career, fans continued to support them (Ratliff, 2014), which can be considered the public's acknowledgement of the engagement and sacrifice IdrA put into their eSports career.

This may be interpreted as the effect of celebrity worship, which can have deep psychological effects, forming part of a fan's own personality and social identity. McCutcheon et al. (2002) proposed the absorption-addiction model of celebrity worship, detailing the different dimensions of fans' psychological engagement with fandom activities. Even in the most basic dimension – 'entertainment-social' – the fan will actively seek out facets of the celebrity and 'daily communications by that celebrity, such as about their commitment to a particular brand. Since a person's online identity is created through social networking, conversation and the exchange of information (Hongladarom, 2011, p. 537), the celebrity's commitment to the brand will be absorbed and become part of the fan's identity. This eventually translates to brand loyalty and influences the individual's tastes and purchase intentions.

5.1.1.3. Business Perspective Analysis. Although the pro-gamers in the documentary were celebrities, they differed from other celebrities because they were highly specialised, that is, professional at playing one brand of game. In other words, their stardom

was born from the brand. Therefore, the relationship between consumer stewards and brand owners also has to be close. This changes the nature of what people understand as celebrity branding. Instead of creating their own brand, for example, Elizabeth Hurley's fashion (Barron, 2007, p. 443), where the brand is built entirely from the celebrity's 'persona [and] image, and upon the centrality of her body within the promotion of the range', these pro-gamer celebrities attached themselves to a brand before using it as a launching pad for their own brand (Hamm & Carney, 2005). This means that while publicly, consumer stewards have to be presented as one of the public, in operation, nature and practice, they have to establish a close link with the brand owner. This requires delicate *impression management* or *personal branding* (Young, 2009b) in order to prevent misrepresentation (Watson, 2009).

5.1.2. Analysis of the Netnography Results

In Chapter 4, the results revealed how consumer stewards operate and the community's response to their exceptional service to the community (i.e. create highly resonant/high-impact content). This data can be analysed using the roles described in the existing literature on the functions of consumer stewards (see Section 2.2.3.2.2: ESports Consumers), namely, leader, co-producer and marketer. By performing these roles on top of being a consumer, consumer stewards can establish themselves within the community. In short, these roles are the mechanism for the acceptance of consumer stewards' power position. They act as enabling and restricting factors for consumer stewards by establishing who the consumer stewards are within the brand community and what they can or cannot do.

5.1.2.1. The Leader Role. Since the term 'consumer steward' contains the word 'steward', this already points to leadership being an important enabling factor that allows consumer stewards' existence within the community. To be accepted as leaders, they must be capable of performing the key duties of a leader. To test this, this research employed the work of Denison et al. (1995) on the 12 leadership roles as a framework to interpret the collected data.

5.1.2.1.1. Create. In the context of this community, a consumer steward needs to be a leader who creates. YouTube, by definition, is a user-generated content platform (YouTube, 2020). Hence, since all consumer stewards identified in this study were active YouTubers, they were shown to meet this criterion. On the macro level, it was evident that the result of consumer stewards' high level of engagement was their creative capital being transformed into other forms of capital and power.

However, there was also evidence that consumer stewards are required to perform various roles under the category of creative leader in order to be accepted into the community and expand their reach. First, a creative leader needs to be an innovator. In this regard, Lowko had to consistently develop and manage their personal branding. At the start of Lowko's YouTube channel in 2011, all three videos were tutorials. As time went by, more varieties were added to the mix. Video Mar 30, 2012 was the first evidence of a personal gameplay showcase. Video Jan 4, 2014 saw Lowko starting to conduct brand-related news updates. In video Jan 3, 2016, Lowko ran coaching sessions online and shared the recordings of these sessions with his fans. Video Jan 3, 2017 was Lowko's first time demonstrating their ability to cast professional gameplay. By video Jan 4, 2018, Lowko had started to cast unique and entertaining amateur games submitted by fans. With every one of these innovations, this consumer steward's reach was extended and accepted into that particular genre within the *StarCraf*t field.

Consumer stewards also need to be visionary, which is defined as 'anticipating customer needs [and] identifying the changing needs of the customer. Anticipating what the customer will want next' (Robinson, 2016, p. 180). Day9's Funday Monday video series is an excellent example of this. The series aimed to set a task for the fans every Monday and to show the results in the following Monday's video. The tasks Day9 gave were not random but were designed to enhance human/brand interest and attract enough view counts to maintain visibility (as one of the highlights in the dataset).

The last role of a creative leader is to be a motivator, that is, to inspire other people (Robinson, 2016, p. 180). In the case of a brand community, the intention is to inspire others to engage with the brand. Whether it was through tutorials or commentating on professional or even amateur games, the dataset demonstrated how PiG (for example) would devote, on average, 21% of their overall content to information about a game. The purpose of this was to teach fans how best to play, win and enjoy the game. Fans also recognised this knowledge and skill, as 24% of all comments pertained to the information given in the video. Fans of PiG thereby demonstrated that their understanding of the brand had improved, making their engagement with the brand easier and continuously motivating them to engage with it.

In summary, from the perspective of a creative leader, being an innovator enables consumer stewards to extend their reach, being a visionary enables them to attract more fans (social capital and referent power) and being a motivator enables them to promote engagement within their brand tribes.

5.1.2.1.2. ***Compete.*** According to Denison et al. (1995), if consumer stewards are leaders, they must also compete against each other through the roles of producer, driver and competitor. The simplest way for consumer stewards to compete as producers is to demonstrate how much they have already done for the community. Almost every one of Day9's early videos was numbered, revealing the volume of content Day9 had produced (and therefore their level of commitment). As previously mentioned, in 2011, the second year of Day9's YouTube channel, the number of videos had already reached 227. Three years later, in 2014, the number of videos was 664. Similarly, PiG's video Jan 1, 2020 #2 was titled 'Inducing a Brain Bleed | The Florencio Files #113', which suggests that it was part of an extremely long-running series. Lowko would circulate statistics about how many videos they had created and how long they had spent online every month on other social platforms, such as Facebook, to demonstrate to the fandom that they were still current, relevant and professional. For example, in February 2020, LowkoTV (2020a) posted:

It's February! Here's my January summary:

- Posted 26 videos on the main YouTube channel
- Streamed 152 hours on Twitch
- Took 5.5 days off to prevent burnout
- ±4.2 million new views

On track.

This particular post received nearly 200 likes from Lowko's fans and many similar encouraging comments, such as: 'That's an awesome summary man keep it up!' and 'Good on you LowkoTV for taking time off. Nobody can consistently deliver quality goods if they don't look after themselves first. Love your SC2 videos!' (LowkoTV, 2020a). This evidence highlights that the producer role allows consumer stewards to demonstrate their professionalism and engagement with the brand community by competing against other consumer stewards.

The role of driver emphasises speed in production and the resolution of any emerging issue (Robinson, 2016). Both Lowko and PiG had videos that could be categorised as news. For Lowko, it was Jan 4, 2014, which was a news update about periodical innovations in the game. For PiG, it was Jan 3, 2017, which was a preview of an official tournament event that was soon to take place. Although, as with all news, there is a period when it is most valuable and relevant, being the first person to put out news has an obvious advantage in competing with others – acquiring more viewers and maintaining currency with audiences.

Even though Day9's dataset did not capture any videos that could be categorised as news, it nevertheless demonstrated the driver's role. Remember that being a driver is about speed, which can come with certain demands and pressures, for example, the need to be the quickest and produce the most videos. As a result of this pressure, Day9 reduced his *StarCraft* content from 2015 onwards, the reason for which has already been stated: *StarCraft* content demands long hours of production time, while other gaming content requires less time and generates similar view counts. Thus, while one could claim that Day9 lost in his competition against other consumer stewards within the same brand community, it could also be assessed as an overall win for them because they picked the path that allowed them to be a better driver.

The last role of a leader is that of competitor. This is one aspect that is unique for the consumer stewards in this study. The three consumer stewards were part of the *StarCraft II* community, which is an eSport. Since eSports, by definition, is about being competitive, this characteristic must be built into consumer stewards' identity. For instance, PiG's professional eSports athletic background and resulting tutorial-style YouTube videos allowed PiG to teach their fans how to play *StarCraft II* expertly, and their expert-level skill enabled them to compete against other consumer stewards, such as the aforementioned Avilo. Therefore, every competition presented a chance for PiG to exercise their expert and informational power in order to demonstrate their skill and value to the community. In addition, with every victory, PiG demonstrated their legitimacy in the community while also boosting their referent power.

In summary, being a leader who competes enables consumer stewards to demonstrate their professionalism, expert power, and informational and legitimacy powers against other consumer stewards to increase their own capital. What drives competition is the speed with which forms of power are transformed into capital. The quicker creative capital is produced, the quicker the influence it generates can be transformed into other forms of capital. Since competing is for the sake of increasing capital, consumer stewards may sometimes lose influence within the brand community to gain an overall increase of power and capital across multiple brand communities.

5.1.2.1.3. Collaborate. The third characteristic of a leader is collaboration, which is exhibited through the roles of facilitator, mentor and empathiser (Denison et al., 1995). With regard to the role of facilitator, one example was Day9's video Jan 2, 2011, where they facilitated the Funday Monday event. At a macro level, this action was a way for this consumer steward to promote engagement with their fans and establish or reaffirm the hierarchical structure within the tribe. However, when examined under the lens of the facilitator role, Day9

could be seen as exercising their power of influence over their fans in the plainest way possible and receiving capital (in the form of gameplay submissions) directly from the fans.

As for the mentor role, across all three consumer stewards, most of their videos contained portions where the intention was to teach their fans about expert skills. At the macro level, this is a way for consumer stewards to exercise their expert and informational powers. However, when examined under the lens of the mentor role, this interaction can also be seen as a way for consumer stewards to co-create content with fans. For example, in Lowko's video Jan 3, 2016, they recorded a coaching session with one of their fans. The background for this was that Lowko provided their coaching fee online, and fans who believed in their skill could contact and arrange a coaching session with them. In this case, Lowko recorded the session and uploaded it as a YouTube video. Thus, even though it was recorded and hosted by Lowko, their video was a co-creation born from the mentor role they exerted.

An empathising leader connects with their followers through emotion and feelings (O'Grady, 2009). In this regard, all three consumer stewards had content where they passionately cast professional and amateur games. As with any sport (eSports included), sportscasting plays a massive role in making sense of the game's content for the viewer (Jenkins, 2000). It takes skill (expert) and charm (referent) to be accepted by the audience. In exchange, casters wield tremendous influence over the audience (Desmarais & Bruce, 2010). The two main elements of good sportscasting are selection and interpretation (Bailey & Sage, 1988). Selection relies on the caster's expert ability to pick out something of human interest, while interpretation relates to interpreting the selected information through their personality and identity. This personality and identity blend was what the consumer stewards excelled at. In the comment sections of these casting videos, it was often found that viewers were drawn into the game by the consumer stewards' narratives and agreed with their interpretations of the game. This was the consumer stewards' way of creating and extending their own field and habitus for their fans to share. Here, the role of empathiser was what enabled these consumer stewards to create their shared experience at the emotional level.

In summary, being a collaborative leader enables consumer stewards and fans to co-create capital, with the added benefit of cultivating engagement with the personal brand and the shared social reality (field and habitus) for one's tribe.

5.1.2.1.4. ***Control.*** The last set of characteristics of being a leader is associated with control and includes regulator, monitor and coordinator roles. The role of regulator is a challenging task for consumer stewards, testing their ability to establish rules and acceptable

behaviour (i.e. habitus) for their community and punishing those who do not honour the rules through a form of coercive power. The first part, the establishment of regulations, was demonstrated in the discussion of consumer stewards' ability to create their own field and habitus. It is the second part, the exertion of coercive power, that presents challenges. Although controlling people's online behaviour is difficult, too much control will lead to backlash and negative emotions (Nugier et al., 2007, p. 1699). Maintaining order within the tribe is still needed to maintain the stability of the community. Therefore, consumer stewards must exercise such control by navigating the complexity of an online community that has no obligation to follow them if they disagree while also trying to protect the bounded nature of their brand and identity.

Indeed, one of Lowko's videos, video Jan 3, 2016, demonstrated how sensitive the community could be, especially when provoked. In this case, Lowko conducted a coaching session on streaming when one of their fans donated €100 through Twitch. First, Lowko thanked the donor, then joked that their grateful manner might be perceived as a 'sell-out'. Finally, Lowko spoke about the harsh life of an online streamer: 'You can never do something right man; like, whatever you do, it's always wrong; it doesn't matter' (LowkoTV, 2020b).

As this was happening, the community watched and listened in on the conversation and posted messages on the forum (jokingly or not), such as 'shit storm incoming' and 'sell out' (LowkoTV, 2020b). Although the whole incident was interpreted as a joke, it was still a good demonstration of how sensitive and quick to act the community can be. However, if this instance had been serious and Lowko's fans had been offended, they could have chosen to go to another content creator because they had no obligation to follow a particular consumer steward if they did not like the individual or, in this case, being regulated by them.

Similarly, the role of monitor also presents a considerable challenge for consumer stewards. The monitor role can be interpreted as the ability to detect if anything is amiss. As a leader, if one cannot detect an existing problem, one will not be able to respond to and correct it. For consumer stewards in this study, the most obvious way to monitor was to look at the feedback section of each video. On the surface, this may sound simple, but the logistics are against a steward who is trying to expand. A consumer steward wanting to expand will need to increase in areas such as the number of years in the role, number of videos created, number of views and number of followers. If there are more videos and more views, there must also be more comments. Naturally, since a consumer steward is an individual and not an organisation, there is always an upper limit to how many issues they can respond to. For example, the very first video Lowko made in 2011

had 80 comments. Conceivability, one could go through every comment and respond to each one. However, by 2018, their video Jan 4, 2018 had 2,217 comments; it would be extremely difficult to read through all the comments, let alone respond to them. This would assume that all the comments were made on the same day, which would be impossible. As Bourdieu (1984) stated, when one's social status increases, it creates distance between one and one's followers. A diminished ability to monitor can be seen as an effect of this. Thus, the monitoring role becomes increasingly tricky for consumer stewards to perform.

To deal with this deficiency in the regulator and monitor roles, consumer stewards could find other levers to survey their community while remaining distant from surveillance practices. The answer, in this case, is IT. In Table 5.1, a conversation from Lowko's video Jan 4, 2018 sheds light on the involvement of IT. From this exchange, it is clear that Lowko established a 'no sexual words or images policy' in their Twitch channel forums. Then, in order to monitor and enforce this policy, IT was used. Moreover, enforcement, or coercive power, was applied covertly.

Table 5.1

Lowko's Video Comments Selection

Fan A	I got permanently banned from chatting on your twitch channel because I typed a "8===>" symbol one time....your mods are fucked up and I won't be viewing your stream anymore. Shame, as I do enjoy your content, but your mods are god damn stupid nazis. I would keep that in check if I were you Lowko, that was fucking ridiculous. Your mods shouldn't be costing you viewers.
Reply from Fan B	Take responsibility for one's own actions? Blasphemy!
Reply from Fan A	@[Fan B] Or you could lighten up and embrace being silly every once in a while...no you're right, more fun to be a square dipshit full time
Reply from Fan A	@[Fan C] Pretty sure I already did take resp. by posting that comment...I actually saw Lowko in another twitch channel's chat and said I was sorry if that was crossing the line....he unbanned me and thought the whole thing was silly.

Reply from Fan D	@[Fan A] I'm all for stupid fun. By all means make sexual remarks, jokes, puns, whatever; but if you're resorting to phallic imagery as what you consider hilarious, you should really double check your standards. Also, taking responsibility does not equate to writing a comment complaining about how shit someone's mods are. Taking responsibility is realising that you did something that someone else did not approve of, and owning up to it and ensuring you won't do it again. Simple respect. Not "q.q hater mods all your fault feggits, unsubscribed never watch again even thou i liek ur content"
Reply from Fan A	@ [Fan D] I SAID I SPOKE TO LOWKO ON ANOTHER TWITCH CHANNEL AND ENDED UP GETTING UNBANNED. GO WRITE A NOVEL YOU LOSER DUMB FUCK....PHALLIC IMAGERY?!? REALLY?! LOL GET A LIFE SHIT FACE.
Reply from Fan D	@ [Fan A] And just like that, you've proved my point. Immature much.

Indeed, one could not find a code of conduct listed in any of Lowko's community channels, nor did they mention the rules of conduct explicitly within any of the videos collected in this study. Instead, Lowko established rules and codes of behaviour in the undertones of the video content they created. Hence, IT was used to implement control so that Lowko could perform the regulator and monitor role of a leader and construct order and habitus within the community without offending the fans.

The last aspect of control is being a coordinated leader or keeping projects under control (Denison et al., 1995). As we have already established, consumer stewards are leaders who create. In this regard, all three consumer stewards in this study implemented control of their own projects to some degree. For example, both PiG and Lowko would give out information on what videos they would do next. In Day9's case, it was even more forceful because they would set up homework for their fans to do for the following week. Through this role as coordinator, order and structure were established within consumer stewards' tribes, thus reaffirming the hierarchy of the tribe.

In summary, being a leader who can exert control enables consumer stewards to apply a hierarchical structure within the field (social reality) they have created. Although it is within consumer stewards' right to be forceful when implementing the rules, the evidence reveals that coercive power is generally applied indirectly to minimise alienation of the community. These cases illustrated the precarious nature of consumer stewards' position and the ongoing work required to maintain acceptance, capital and control in a changing community landscape.

5.1.2.2. The Producer/Content Creator Role. In the previous section, we examined the data through the leader role, and aspects of the producer role have already been touched on, for example, the leader as a creator. After all, as Schouten and McAlexander (1995) showed, it is through creation and co-creation that leadership is established. So, it is helpful to examine consumer stewards through the lens of the producer rather than the leader. This section focuses on how consumer stewards create products that allow them to gain legitimacy by controlling the core of the community – the game itself (Seo, 2013).

5.1.2.2.1. Legitimate Power. Consumer stewards must build a relationship with an official brand and their fans to create their own brand. In this regard, the role of the producer 'produces' consumer stewards' much-needed legitimacy and places them in between the brand owner and other consumers or players. This legitimacy is obtained in three ways: professionalism in IT, space and time.

5.1.2.2.2. Professionalism in IT. If we compare videos made by all three consumer stewards in the early stages of their YouTube careers with their current videos, there is a distinct disparity in production skill levels. However, in all cases, as the status of consumer stewards evolved, so too did their command of video production, leading to higher-quality content production. For example, in video Sep 22, 2011, in the first year of Lowko's YouTube journey, a fan commented: 'Nice video, sorry about u sacrifice graphics to show a cool video and a kind of guide to the future pros' (LowkoTV, 2020b). This comment indicates that while the video content was good enough to attract the audience, the IT aspect held it back.

Time moved on, and by video Jan 4, 2015, the comments show that Lowko's skill in IT was honed enough to teach others: 'Hi Lowko I was just wondering what type of note-taking program you use for your coaching sessions' (LowkoTV, 2020b). Then, two years later, in video Jan 2, 2017, a fan commented: 'hey man!! awsome video! i also have a sc2 gameplay vids on my channel i just started. please check it out let me know what you think. i also got webcam and keyboard-cam in my game play' (LowkoTV, 2020b). Thus, IT and professionalism (e.g. the skill of a producer) help establish legitimate power in the relationship between consumer stewards and fans.

5.1.2.2.3. Professionalism in Space. If skill in IT is about consumer stewards mastering their products, then professionalism in space relates to consumer stewards mastering their products' content. In the context of this research, legitimacy is about one's right to be in such a position – the right to exist as a steward in the *StarCraft II* community. However, what does this legitimacy mean? One aspect of this is the mastering of *StarCraft II* content beyond the mere ability to play the game, such as tutorials, casting, news and many other aspects. It is like comparing two candidates for a job position. The one who has more on their CV would appear more legitimate than the other. Similarly, consumer stewards can occupy either one or multiple genres through their creative capital, but the more genres they occupy, the more legitimate they appear to the community. Hence, when it comes to professionalism in space, 'expansion' is the keyword. From the dataset, two types of expansion were detected: interior and exterior. In terms of effects, interior expansion relates to building the fan community, while exterior expansion relates to testing the unity of the established community.

First, we shall discuss interior expansion. If we look at the genres of consumer stewards' videos across their careers, there was a clear increase in variety. It is important to remember that all these videos focused on *StarCraft*. Thus, all the varieties/genres were created within the same field. Similar to adding furniture to a new apartment, consumer stewards, with each new video genre, occupied more sections within the available space. In other words, this professionalism in developing a new genre enabled them to increase their physical presence and generate more immersion in the brand, which subsequently granted them legitimate power in their relationship with the brand and the fans.

Exterior expansion is about enabling consumer stewards' ability to occupy space outside of the field created by one brand (in this case, the *StarCraft* brand). This is achieved by introducing new brands. One observation during the data collection stage was that all three consumer stewards posted content about other brands. The scope of this study stopped at the boundary of the *StarCraft II* brand. Therefore, this study did not pursue the interconnectedness present in the data. However, one risk of this expansion is being perceived as a traitor or turncoat by the community. Bourdieu (1984) stated that it is difficult for anyone to move beyond the field where they originally came from. Therefore, legitimate power decreases the further away consumer stewards move from the field where they originated, but there is also a chance of reducing legitimate power in the original field.

For example, in the case of Day9, when they reduced their production of *StarCraft* videos, they started to produce videos of other brands. These brands included *Command & Conquer* (another

real-time strategy game similar to *StarCraft*), *Magic: The Gathering* (a collectable and competitive card game) and *Dota 2* (a multiplayer online battle area), to name but a few. All of these were still part of competitive gaming, and some were very similar to *StarCraft*, where Day9 first established their legitimacy in competitive gaming. Day9 was clearly aware of how they established their legitimacy and rarely strayed far from it to infer a certain level of credibility. Just like if an NBA player suddenly were to decide to play football, although they may not be the best out there, one would still expect them to know more about the sport than the average person. The same could not be said if this NBA player were to suddenly want to become a hairdresser.

As previously indicated, exterior expansion is also a test of the unity of the fan community. When Day9 moved away from *StarCraft*, their presence in the *StarCraft* community was diminished. However, this reduction in presence did not necessarily mean a loss of influence within the *StarCraft* community. In the case of Day9, their current videos and their high viewer counts demonstrate that their influence in the *StarCraft* community has not vanished just because they have withdrawn from the brand community. One likely reason is that Day9 occupied enough space within the *StarCraft* community; thus, there was a 'legitimate' place for Day9 to return, even after a long absence.

5.1.2.2.4. Professionalism in Time. The last aspect that enables consumer stewards to gain legitimate power is professionalism in time. In the existing literature, it was established that professionalism requires a high level of engagement and consistency (Seo, 2016). The word 'consistency' explicitly emphasises the factor of time. In other words, one way to build this relationship between consumer stewards, a brand and their fans is to establish consumer stewards' presence through high levels of engagement over an extended period. For example, in the dataset of Lowko, video Sep 20, 2011, the first video on Lowko's YouTube channel, had many recent comments from current fans on the legacy and legitimacy Lowko had established over several years. This is something common across all three consumer stewards. Moreover, in examining videos further down the line, established fans occassionally mentioned the changes and growth consumer stewards had undergone.

Thus, the role of producer enables consumer stewards 'to gain legitimate power by constructing this relationship, placing them between brand owners and other consumers' (Wang et al., 2022, p. 257). This is not a simple task. It requires exceptionally high levels of engagement (for example, professionalism) in conjunction with IT, space and time. Within the Bourdieusian

framework, this process could be categorised as a change in social trajectory, elevating select individuals from consumers/players to high-capital leaders.

5.1.2.3. The Marketer Role. Consumer stewards act like marketers in the same way that celebrities or influencers hired by advertisers market brands. The celebrity's own brand is linked to and capable of enhancing the product's brand as well as their own (Singh & Banerjee, 2019). Therefore, to be a marketer, consumer stewards must (1) create their own celebrity brand to generate social capital and (2) exchange social capital for other forms of capital. Subscribers lead to popularity, and popularity leads to endorsements (Singh & Banerjee, 2019). Indeed, Lowko's voice was made into an in-game purchase (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019) because of their influence in the community. This is just one of many examples of how popularity within the brand community can bring prestige and wealth. Since the second part of this equation is well-known and established, this section's netnographic interpretation focuses on the first part of the equation: celebrity/self-brand building.

5.1.2.3.1. Self-Branding. The ability to self-brand was shown to be the foundation of consumer stewards' identity, which is created through a combination of individual uniqueness and external factors (Hongladarom, 2011). According to Wang et al. (2022),

> 'The use of social media channels, the promotion of self-created content and a robust engagement strategy appear crucial for creating one's brand. The process of self-branding is unique to each of the stewards analysed, as each sought to highlight particular aspects of their profile or credibility within the community to gain visibility. In some instances, stewards relied on their authentic attachment to the community through their previous lives as eSports participants (thereby positioning themselves as experts or mentors, that is, leaders)'. (p. 252)

In another case, a consumer steward relied upon their own love of sports or fan status to build credibility. Wang et al. (2022) further stated that,

> 'The analysis suggests that while building consumer steward status through multiple channels is possible, the process of self-branding requires a strategic approach that maximises one or two key attributes for which consumer stewards can become known. To develop their own brand, consumer stewards appeared to adopt two strategies: (1) the creation of a unique identity and (2) the identification of similarities'. (p. 252)

This is reminiscent of Bourdieu (1984) notion of self-branding as a cultural product that combines one's effort to distinguish oneself from the dominant class and its value with one's ability to stand close enough to the dominant class to allow others to infer social status – simply

put, one's function as an individual (to be unique) and as a member of a class of people (to be uniform or identical). The dataset showed that through this paradoxical narrative, consumer stewards' brands may develop.

5.1.2.3.2. ***Uniqueness.*** In Wang et al. (2022) the following observation was made.

> 'All three consumer stewards used their videos to demonstrate their unique worth. For PiG and Day9, this action was less pronounced, and they achieved it by sharing their past experiences to establish credibility. Both PiG and Day9 had a history of being professional athletes and professional (brand-recognised and hired) casters. Their experiences were unique and made them celebrities within the brand community even before they were active YouTubers' (p. 255).

Lowko, meanwhile, started his ascent to consumer steward as a YouTuber, and it was not until 2019 (eight years after the creation of their channel) that they were acknowledged by the *StarCraft* brand owner (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019). Without any prior accomplishment or recognition in the sport, Lowko had to create a unique narrative. This narrative was a simple catchphrase: 'Don't forget to smile, right? And I'll see you in the next one' (Wang et al., 2022, p. 256).

By examining Lowko's videos to search this phrase, Wang et al. (2022, p. 256) observed that, '[t]his catchphrase appeared in most of Lowko's videos. Indeed, Lowko was the only one of the three consumer stewards in this study who had a catchphrase. This message was so successfully constructed that it became a cultural phenomenon within their brand tribe'. Fans would complain every time Lowko forgot to put the catchphrase at the end. Under a video on 2 January 2017, a fan commented: 'Hey Lowko, where is your Bye in the end of the video :o its like a highlight when you say "do not forget to smile! and i see you in the next one, bye"'. Similarly, under a video on 3 January 2020, another fan commented: 'How will I remember to smile if you do not remind me, c'mon Lowko!' (LowkoTV, 2020b). Furthermore, when the *StarCraft* brand recognised Lowko in 2019, even they mentioned the catchphrase: 'The Lowko announcer pack will be available for purchase in the "Collection" tab with the release of patch 4.8.3. Feel free to say GG to Lowko by tweeting him at @LowkoTV, and as always, don't forget to smile' (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019).

5.1.2.3.3. ***Similarity.*** Similarity is achieved through association and priming. Priming can be defined as the scenario where one is exposed to a stimulus and has a trigger response to a subsequent stimulus, whereas association refers to a situation where two prominent brands start to come together (Kahneman, 2013). The reason famous brands hire

celebrities to market for them is to achieve priming and positive association. In the case of consumer stewards, this process occurs in reverse because the ones seeking to do the marketing are the consumer stewards themselves.

Wang et al. (2022) made the following observsation in regards to the similiarty all three consumer stewards have shown.

> 'All three consumer stewards attempted to form associations with eSports brands or celebrity figures within the brand community. Again, this was relatively easy for PiG and Day9 because of their prior and existing associations with the brand. For example, in PiG's 24 February 2013 video, they spent the entire runtime announcing that they were joining a new professional eSports team. Likewise, Day9's 15 March 2020 video narrated stories from their experience as an announcer for professional games hired by the brand owner. Although Lowko did not have any prior association with similar eSports brands, this deficiency was only a technical one, and Lowko's method of achieving priming was the same: the creation of a narrative that associated their brand with the brand community at large.
>
> 'The data shows that Lowko created this narrative in several ways. The first method was a direct association with the brand. For example, on 2 January 2018, Lowko posted the first series of videos of them playing a *StarCraft II* campaign. The opening contained a punchline: 'Hell, it is about time'. In the comments, many fans quoted this line, indicating their love for the game and their joy at the fact that Lowko was finally making videos on their favourite franchise's story campaign. Thus, fans' love for the brand and certain aspects/phrases were being superimposed onto Lowko'. (p. 256)

This purloining of existing brand narratives and eSports storylines in assuming one's own profile helped to build Lowko's credibility and visibility within the community by aligning them with the creative or imaginative aspects of eSports rather than the technical ones (like PiG and Day9). Lowko leveraged existing brand narratives. This self-alignment with those narratives' resonance with the community represents another iteration of how existing community values, brand narratives and well-known nuances can be co-opted to build authenticity beyond simple expertise. In this respect, Lowko shows an evolution in consumer stewardship beyond simple authenticity or technical credibility.

'The second method that Lowko and the other two consumer stewards applied was forming an association with brand celebrities by casting professional games' (Wang et al., 2022, p. 256).

For example, Lowko's 2 January 2020 video depicted a professional gameplay session between two well-known eSports athletes, Has and CarZ. From the comments, it was clear that one of the two athletes, Has, was a top-rated player within the community. Comments such as 'When I see Has, I click' or 'Has is such a click bait' were repeated many times within the comment forums (LowkoTV, 2020b). Did fans 'like' this video because they liked Has or Lowko? The most rational answer would be both. This was, in fact, the point. eSports athlete Has and YouTuber Lowko were primed together through the video (Kahneman, 2013).

'The third method involved collaboration among consumer stewards' (Wang et al., 2022, p. 256). Lowko's 1 January 2019 video contained a selection of the best moments from LowkoTV. This was evidently a series because the title was STARCRAFT INNUENDOS! (LowkoTV Highlights #8), which suggested seven other episodes before this one. On the one hand, the video showcased all Lowko's hard work, as sufficient canon (i.e. appearance on other YouTubers' channel) was needed to create a highlight video like this one. On the other hand, the video demonstrated how Lowko worked with other YouTube channels to create collaborative entertainment for fans. This led Wang et al. (2022, p. 256) to stated that, '[t]his collaboration created an association between the consumer stewards and put them in a class of their own. Relating this to the Bourdieusian framework, it is a way for consumer stewards to distinguish themselves as a class faction or as the dominant class within the brand community'. Through their collective actions, they act as the 'dominant class to impose the definition of the legitimate stakes and weapons' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 254) within the consumer setting.

To conclude, by examining the data regarding consumer stewards' role as marketers, we see that self-branding is the combination of creating individual uniqueness and identifying similarities with the dominant class. At its core, it is a narrative about legitimacy. It allows consumer stewards to distinguish themselves from ordinary consumers, become part of the dominant class or a faction of the dominant class and establish their legitimate status within the brand community.

5.1.2.4. Summary of the Analysis of the Findings of Netnography. Through the roles of leader and marketer, several important enabling/constraining factors for the emergence of consumer stewards become clear. While being a leaders, creative leaders can extend their influence and promote engagement. Competitive leaders exchange power and capital by demonstrating their professionalism and expert, informational and legitimate powers to others, including other consumer stewards. Collaborative leaders create field and habitus within their tribe through the co-creation of capital with their fans. Controlling leaders indirectly exercise

reward and coercive power and establish hierarchical/class structures within the tribes they create. While being a producer, the professionalism demonstrated through IT, space and time enables consumer stewards to gain legitimate power, which helps to establish their dominant class status. Finally, being a marketer is a delicate identity management project that positions consumer stewards in a narrative of similarity and uniqueness.

5.2. Discussion

In the previous section, the data presented in Chapter 4 (Findings) were analysed, and issues such as consumer stewards' functions and relationships with the brand, the brand owner and the brand community were highlighted. This section comprises three sub-sections aims to answer the three research questions.

5.2.1. Research Question #1: The Composition and Function of Consumer Stewards

Research question #1 is as follows:

- What are the practices of consumer stewards within the context of an online consumer community?

Bourdieu (1984) definition of practice, that is, '(habitus)(capital) + field = practice' (p. 101). This includes how consumer stewards create their style (i.e. identity) through the creation of narrative and the exchange between capital and power to establish their social position. Furthermore, this research question also pertains to how such practices operate within an online consumer community, that is, what such practices lead to or how these practices function within the online community. In other words, this research aimed to examine the composition as well as the function of consumer stewards.

After comparing and contrasting the three consumer stewards (Lowko, PiG, and Day9), the composition and the function of consumer stewards seem to be universal, at least at a generalised level. Therefore, it could be implied that a formula, checklist or even a graphical representation could be constructed to describe the makeup of consumer stewards.

To start construct a graphical representation of consumer stewards' lifecycle, one needs to first identify the start and end points of a consumer's journey to becoming a consumer steward: engagement (where it begins) and consumer steward (where it ends). Throughout this study, consumer engagement was always the key that differentiated the unique from the mundane. One important point to note is that a high level of engagement with the brand and the community is required to create a consumer steward. This can be seen through the commitment demonstrated by the eSport athlete in Good Game documentary (Ratliff, 2014) and hundreds of video content

created by the three consumer stewards (Lowko, PiG and Day9) on their YouTube channel examined by this study. This high level of engagement leads to identity and impression management (Schneider, 1981), resulting in self-branding (Young, 2009b). Unlike the reality and identity created by an ordinary individual, the brand created by consumer stewards contains their own field and habitus, capable of extensive social interaction. This social interaction is characterised by promoting engagement with and from consumer stewards' fans. Figure 5.1 presents a graphical representation of this causal chain. In short, Engagement level 1 can be broken down into level 2 Fans and Fan's Engagement and Consumer Stewards Engagement. Level 2 Consumer Stewards Engagement leads to level 2 Identity Management, resulting in level 2 Self-Branding. Self-branding can be further breakdown into level 3 Field and Habitus, which feed back into Fans and Fan's Engagement. The colour is auto-assigned to differentiate levels.

Figure *5.1*

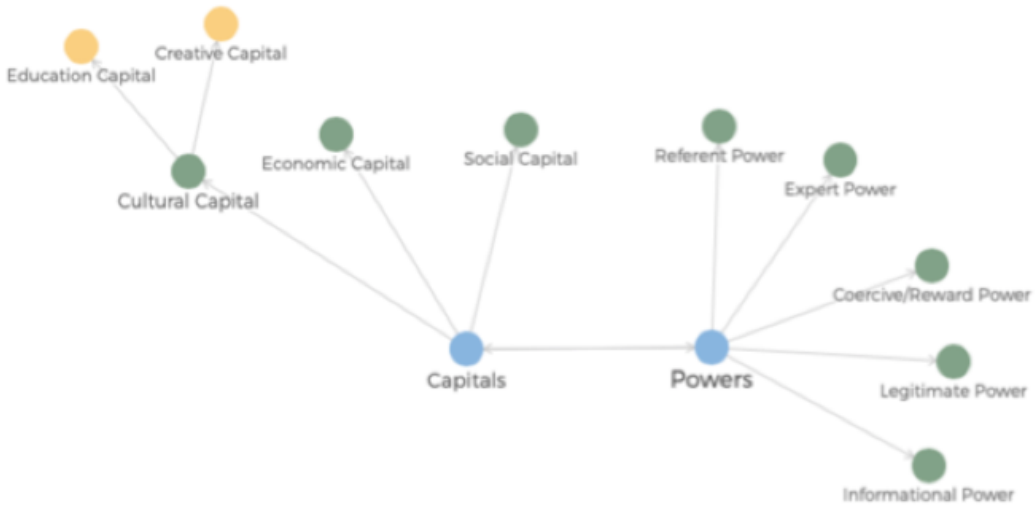
Engagement to Self-Branding

Self-branding is one important component, but it is not enough to create a consumer steward. Being a consumer steward is about changing one's social trajectory, which is characterised by either a transverse or vertical movement. According to Bourdieu (1984), this movement requires the accumulation and exchange of capitals. Therefore, the second component of consumer stewards is capitals. In the existing literature and the data collected, it was evident that the exchange of capitals involves a complex exchange between capitals and powers and vice versa. Capitals include social, cultural and economic capital, and cultural capital can be further divided into creative and education capital (Bourdieu, 2011). Powers include coercive/reward, referent, legitimate, expert and informational power (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965). Figure 5.2

shows this interplay between capitals and powers. In short, level 2 Capitals and Powers are in a consistent exchange status. Capitals can be breakdown into level 3 Social, Economic and Cultural capital. Cultural Capital can be further broken down into level 4 Education and Creative capital. Powers can be breakdown into level 3 Expert, Referent, Coercive/Reward, Legitimate, and Informational Power.

Figure 5.2

Capitals and Powers



By combining Figures 5.1 and 5.2, it becomes clear what makes a consumer steward. A consumer steward is constructed by self-branding as well as by accumulating and subsequently exchanging capitals with various forms of power. This can be expressed in the form of an equation.

Terminology: '=' means 'equal' and '⇔' means 'if and only if'

Let consumer steward = CS

Let self-branding = SB

Let exchange and accumulation of capitals = Cs

Thus, consumer steward, meaning both self-branding and exchanging and accumulating capitals, can be written as:

CS = SB ⇔ Cs

This relationship can also be illustrated by combining Figures 5.1 and 5.2, as shown in Figure 5.3. In short, level 2 Self-branding and Capitals (in consistent exchange with Powers) join to create level 1 Consumer Steward.

Figure 5.3

Components of Consumer Stewards

The equation and Figure 5.3 explain where consumer stewards come from. However, they do not explain what consumer stewards are supposed to do for the brand community. Everything that exists must have a purpose, and this study explores this very purpose, that is, the three roles consumer stewards perform for the brand community – the roles of producer, leader and marketer.

In Chapter 4, we demonstrated that each consumer steward role could be further broken down into its own components. For example, the leader role contains four categories: compete, create, control and collaborate; the producer role can be broken down into time, space and IT (in combination with professionalism); and the marketer role demands consumer stewards to demonstrate uniqueness and similarity to the dominant class in their self-branding. This breakdown is illustrated by the following formula and Figure 5.4.

Terminology: '∧' means 'and'; '⇒' means 'implies'

Let leader role = LR

Let marketer role = MR

Let producer role = PR

CS ⇒ LR ∧ MR ∧ PR

In short, level 1 Consumer Steward can be breakdown (in-term of its functions) into level 2 Marketer, Producer, and Leader. Marketer can be breakdown into level 3 Unique and Similarity. Producer can be breakdown into level 3 Professionalism, IT, Space, and Time. Based on the analysis in Section 5.1.2.2, Professionalism is also connected to IT, Space, and Time individually. Finally, Leader can be breakdown into level 3 Create, Compete, Collaborate, and Control.

Figure 5.4

Functions of Consumer Stewards

If we combine consumer stewards' composition and functions equations, we get a formula: SB ⇔ Cs = CS ⇒ LR ∧ MR ∧ PR.

Similarly, Figures of the composition (see Figure 5.3) and functions (see Figure 5.4) of consumer stewards can be combined into one. However, if we are to combine the two Figures, we must first acknowledge that the components and functions of consumer stewards are not simply the result of cause and effect. Instead, the composition of consumer stewards allows them to perform certain functions, which then feeds back to the overall composition of consumer stewards.

To explain this, it is helpful to consider that 'the primary purpose of any function is to exchange capitals and power. Therefore, the findings generated in the previous chapters with regard to the role of leader, producer and marketer can be translated into a consumer stewards' 'give-and-take' table (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2

Consumer Stewards' Give-and-Take Table

Role	Function (Give)	Benefit (Take)
Leader	Create	Social capital
		Referent power
		Fans' engagement with brand
	Compete	Referent power
		Expert power
		Informational power
		Image of professionalism
		Legitimate power
	Collaborate	Economic capital
		Fans' engagement with brand
		Creates tribal environment (i.e. field)
	Control	Coercive/reward power
		Establishes habitus within the field the consumer steward created
Producer	Information technology (with professionalism)	Legitimate power
	Space (with professionalism)	Legitimate power
	Time (with professionalism)	Legitimate power
	Professionalism	Legitimate power
		Self-branding
Marketer	Unique	Self-branding
	Similarity	Self-branding
		Legitimate power

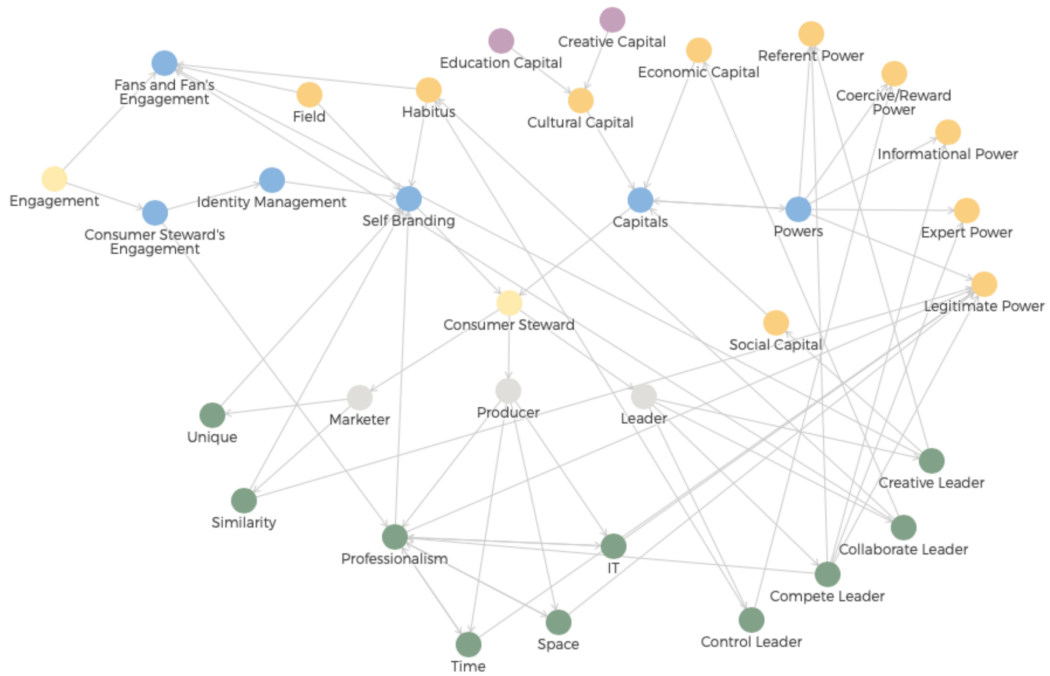
It is important to realize the importance of this table. Suppose one simply combines Figures 5.3 and 5.4. In that case, it will not create a lifecycle of consumer stewards because there is no feedback loop between functions and composition. Thus far, the exchange of Capitals and Powers combined with Self-branding made consumer stewards, allowing them to perform

various functions. For consumer stewards to grow, these functions must also be feedback to self-branding, capitals and powers for the process to be considered a lifecycle. The key words are 'give-and-take'. Consumer stewards have given to the community according to Figure 5.3 and 5.4. Thus, to combine the two, it is essential to understand what consumer stewards take from the community.

With Table 5.2 drawn, we can now combine Figures 5.3 and 5.4 into Figure 5.5: such are the inner workings of the phenomenon that is a consumer steward. It is startling that a consumer can and does demonstrate such a complex exchange of power. It shows that the consumer stewards challenges the traditional definition of consumers, because it cannot explain such complex consumption behaviours. The term consumer steward promoted by this study attempts to redefine the very definition of consumer.

Figure 5.5

Components and Functions of Consumer Stewards



5.2.1.1. Summary of Research Question 1 and the Change in Consumer Stewards' Social Trajectory. By answering the first research question, this research was able to understand the practices of consumer stewards, both in their compositions and their functions. The complex interactions shown in Figure 5.5 provide a clear indication of consumer stewards' ascension from ordinary consumers. In our observations of the three consumer stewards, we saw the motivation behind exercising the powers as well as the means

to obtain more powers. Furthermore, those motivations can be linked to the work of Bourdieu (1984) on changing one's social trajectory.

Bourdieu (1984) argued that through the accumulation and exchange of capital, one can change one's trajectory within the social hierarchy. This process of changing one's social trajectory is also one of self-distinguishing from the group below. However, in a digital environment, the community's size and even one's self-identity are undefinable, in flux and immaterial. The physical world provides a concrete distinction between individuals. Bourdieu (1984) often used education (e.g. degrees and certificates) as an example to differentiate between classes. However, such methods have less persuasive force in the digital realm. So, how can Bourdieu's concept of social trajectory translate into the online environment? In the case of consumer stewards, we see this play out in an interesting way. Behind every consumer steward's success is payment for their accession (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 251), which is based on the rules and pathways created and bounded by the system or community from which it originated.

Through creation, negotiation and exchange of capital, the consumer stewards were able to change their social trajectory, expand their field of influence and ascend the social hierarchy. When comparing and contrasting all three consumer stewards' paths to fame, their methods of self-branding were similar if not identical in nature; the only differences were in the degree to which one would commit to a certain action and aspects that had to do with a specific individual's identity. Becoming consumer stewards was a way for these unique individuals to become part of the system by establishing their legitimacy. Whether acting as marketers, producers or leaders, all three consumer stewards were clearly performing these roles to varying degrees. Their actions defined the quality one must possess to be considered legitimate when performing these roles. This echoes Bourdieu's (1984, p. 254) notion that once consumer stewards establish themselves and are accepted by society as one faction of its dominant class, the dominant class' own composition and functions define consumer stewards' legitimacy of their domination.

Bourdieu (1984) described two types of social movement: transverse and vertical. The consumer stewards in this research were certainly capable of both. Considering their humble background, Lowko made a vertical movement (LowkoTV, 2020b), while Day9, being able to move into other brand communities, accomplished a transverse movement (Day9TV, 2020). Neither movement is easy to achieve, not by any stretch of the imagination. There are constraints within the structure of the brand space and between different brand communities. Nevertheless, engagement appears to have been the key to breaking down these barriers and helping the consumer stewards achieve their current status. The output of their engagement can be observed

in their Twitch.TV statistics in Graphs 3.1 and 3.2, Table 3.3 and the data outlined in Chapters 3 and 4.

5.2.2. Research Question #2: Engagement

Research question #2 was as follows:

- What are the constraining or enabling factors/rules within community norms and behaviours that govern consumer stewards' practices?

In Section 5.1.2 on the netnographic study findings, this thesis analysed consumer stewards as leaders using the 12 leadership roles developed by Denison et al. (1995). We explored how consumer stewards establish their legitimacy through producing/co-creating by following the groundwork of Seo (2013). Further, we verified consumer stewards' need for uniqueness and similarity in self-branding, as stated by researchers such as Hongladarom (2011), Bourdieu (1984) and Kahneman (2013), when acting as marketers. As stated in the analysis, each role is both an enabling and a limiting factor in what consumer stewards can and cannot do.

Furthermore, these roles and nodes in Figure 5.5 create a barrier to entry into the class of consumer stewards. It enables the current members to reduce competition and ensure the new member performs the same functions as the rest of the group. This echoes Bourdieu's (1984) observation of the physical world's social structure. The legitimacy of what constitutes a consumer steward is created and continuously revised by those who came before. In this case, those consumer stewards continue to distinguish themselves from the newcomers by establishing rules for the legitimate conduct of legitimate work. Indeed, the struggle for a legitimate definition and the creation of recognisable signs for the public constitute the pure aesthetic of dominant class' operation. Through this process, the dominant class is divided into various levels and dimensions.

Consumer stewards are a faction of the dominant class and like all dominant class it is filled with rules and barriers. As such, it makes perfect sense that the graphical Figure of the composition and functions of consumer stewards is so complex. Each node in Figure 5.5 is part of 'the legitimate definition of culture and the legitimate way' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 93), defined by the current consumer stewards of the dominant class. Hence, for those who do not wish to follow such rules, there are 'invisible barriers which separate them from the elect' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 163). In other words, those rules are the class condition for the existence of consumer stewards, which is 'presenting itself as a set of possibilities and impossibilities, but also to a relationally defined position, a rank in the class structure' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 246). The more we see this

happen, the more it suggests that the class and classification of consumer stewards is shifting from a hobby to a standardised profession. This inevitably means stricter requirements for someone to join and be recognised by the dominant class as one of its members.

The establishment of requirements or unwritten rules by the dominant class means that every ascension of a consumer steward is achieved through conforming to the underline rules and a struggle for legitimacy. Assuming that with each new entry into the elite class, the rules of entry evolve and adapt, we must ask, 'In the face of these changes and the continuous updating of legitimate definitions, can we find one constant rule for anyone who wishes to enter?'

At first, in this study, this quest for simplicity seemed impossible. Due to the non-physical nature of the online community, many physical boundaries, such as race, gender and social/financial status (physical identities), can be overcome, and any behaviour seems to be tolerated. The case of Avilo in PiG's dataset was an excellent example of this (PiG, 2020). Avilo was an online Twitch steamer with a very bad reputation. However, based on Avilo's influence on the *StarCraft II* community (regardless of whether it was positive or negative), they were clearly also a consumer steward. As such, Avilo possessed all the rights and privileges of a consumer steward and had been able to gain all of these through, shall we say, 'bad sportsmanship'.

However, it appears that despite the tolerance for lawlessness, one rule still applies. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) stated that the only rule for a brand community and, by extension, the online environment is that, in general, one must be engaged with the brand and acknowledged by the community for one's engagement (Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). This is why whenever someone becomes disengaged from the brand, there is a general backlash. In the *Good Game* documentary, IdrA and their infamous premature quitting of a match demonstrated this (Ratliff, 2014). Technically, Day9 was in the same boat as IdrA. In our analysis, we saw examples of fans' frustration with Day9's withdrawal from producing *StarCraft* content (Day9TV, 2020). However, the reason Day9's fans did not react to this withdrawal as negatively as to IdrA's retirement was that Day9 only withdrew from *StarCraft* YouTube content, not from being active in the *StarCraft II* community (Liquipedia, 2020a). As such, Day9 could still express their engagement with the brand, while IdrA could not, which made all the difference in how their actions were viewed by the community.

To further expand on this point of engagement with the brand, a brand owner may even be subjected to prosecution if they disengage from the brand itself through misrepresentation of the brand. *Diablo Immortal*, mentioned in Section 2.2.3.2.2. eSport Consumers, was a great example of this. The brand owner, Blizzard Entertainment, was accused of betraying fans' trust (Knoop,

2018). To put it simply, the brand owner is the legal owner of the product, but the brand community represents its collective consciousness, and the only rule this collective consciousness recognises is engagement, to be precise, engagement with the brand. This finding is not surprising, since the force behind the power of modern consumers is engagement. It was also through the measurement of engagement levels that this study was able to identify and select the three consumer stewards. In summary, engagement (i.e. the level/form of engagement) is the one and only rule that differentiates those who merely have the opportunity to access power from those who take the opportunity to gain power.

5.2.2.1. Engagement and Capital. The notion that engagement is the one crucial rule that enables the emergence of consumer stewards can be taken a few steps further in order to highlight its importance to the phenomenon of consumer stewards. The existing literature suggests that the popularity and connectivity consumer stewards gain from their activism are the reason they are able to act as influencers within the community (Knapp, 2012; Luscombe, 2015; Steinmetz, 2018; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). However, by comparing the three selected influential consumer stewards, especially their backgrounds, it is difficult to claim that being privileged with any form of capital (e.g. education) led to their ultimate ascension to power. Instead, this study demonstrated that their activism, that is, engagement, is what made them privileged in the first place. This finding provides helpful, if not encouraging, insights into our understanding of ICT intervention. Specifically, the intervention of ICT allows an individual to challenge the status quo, with engagement as a main driving force, overcoming hierarchy and other capital privileges (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

For example, Lowko started uploading YouTube videos during their university years, producing those videos as a hobby. Lowko's circumstances, education or experience did not grant them more privileges than other players (Liquipedia, 2020b; LowkoTV, 2020b). The ability to create and upload videos was available to any player of electronic games. Only as the years went by and Lowko's followers increased did this ambition and reality expand into stewardship. The same could be said about the other two consumer stewards, PiG and Day9, examined in this study. While both of them had experience and association with the brand owner that privileged their operations on YouTube, their privilege could be summarised as age, since they were six to seven years older, allowing them to associate themselves with the brand prior to using YouTube (Liquipedia, 2020a, 2020c).

Hence, in comparison to real-life celebrities or people in a privileged position, digital celebrities, like the consumer stewards studied in this thesis, rely less on their station in the physical world

to obtain high popularity and connectivity. Yet, their real-world station still has an effect, with the backgrounds of PiG and Day9 serving as proof of this (Day9TV, 2020; Liquipedia, 2020a, 2020c; PiG, 2020). Nevertheless, because of the digital/immaterial nature of the online community, we must also acknowledge that the barriers to becoming part of the elite class in the online community are less challenging to overcome. This suggests that in the digital community, what an individual does is more valuable than their title. One implication of this concept is for media and communication. If we consider, for example, the early media coverage of COVID-19, especially stories claiming that COVID-19 was a hoax, it is apparent that those who believed those stories were not concerned with the title of the person posting them. Instead, the fact that someone would take the time to write a complex story about COVID-19 being a hoax planted the idea that there was 'no smoke without fire', or there would not be such a post (Freckelton, 2020). This means that there is a battle of engagement (or a show of engagement) when attempting to sway public opinion. When being presented with more information on one opinion, it increases the likelihood that the audience's opinion will be swayed by the information (Kwok et al., 2017).

5.2.2.2. Engagement as Capital. The previous section looked at engagement in comparison to other capitals. It demonstrated that engagement is arguably more important than other forms of capital. This gives rise to another issue, namely, how does one treat engagement as a capital?

The notion of capital is one of the central ideas in the Bourdieusian framework. As Lareau and Weininger (2003, p. 568) once stated, Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural capital is 'beyond dispute'. However, the modern era, especially the digital realm, brings certain challenges to the existing theoretical framework.

One common critique of Bourdieu's theory is that its depiction of social life and class inequality tends to be overly deterministic (Jenkins, 1982). Another critique is that while emotion can affect and is affected by social life, Bourdieu often turns towards a more rational aspect of social life (Theodosius, 2006). Both of these critiques pose challenges to applying a Bourdieusian framework to consumer stewards. However, it should be emphasised that in no way does this research seek to claim that Bourdieu is wrong; rather, certain aspects of the framework need a more flexible interpretation in the modern age in order to better explain the consumer steward phenomenon.

First, although inequality still exists in the digital space and is as rigid and immoveable as Bourdieu described, where opportunities are concerned, there is a certain level of equality.

According to Bourdieu, this equality in opportunity matters very little in the material world. For example, just because everyone can participate in a car race does not mean everyone has the level of capital (e.g. economic or education/skill) to do so.

On the other hand, the digital world is immaterial, which reduces the impact of material capital. What is no longer the issue here is the right to access (Wei & Hindman, 2011). Access to digital content and community is no longer greatly affected by the rights and privileges of someone in the material world. Take economic capital, for example; the eSports game *StarCraft II* is free to play, just like many other eSports games. The game supports itself through advertisements and micro-transactions that only affect the gameplay on a cosmetic level (Kershner, 2021). This is because if eSports wants to keep its identity as a recognised sport like traditional sports (Pizzo et al., 2018), then it must promote the basic concept of fair competition, that is, it can never be pay-to-win. Hence, access to eSports games has very little to do with economic capital.

Similarly, physical world social capital has little effect in terms of access to the community. eSports games rely on massive player-versus-player gameplay; the game mechanics, such as in the case of *StarCraft II*, have built-in community forums and randomly pair and match players for games. This means that even if one has no social capital to speak of, the moment one starts the game, one can participate in community conversations and play with other players. The only judgment you will receive is related to your gaming ability. The testimony of an eSports athlete in the *Good Game* documentary made this point clear (Ratliff, 2014); the more you invest in the game, the better you will be. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the only rule for a brand community is engagement.

However, as mentioned in the previous section, this research did not find that the physical world does not affect one's digital presence. For example, a person's cultural capital can limit their understanding of what is possible based on their education and cultural surroundings (Bourdieu, 1984). This is quite clear from the discussion on the digital divide in the existing literature. Even if everyone has access to the same technology, their education level might prevent them from using the technology to its fullest extent (Eastin et al., 2015). This is why Bourdieu's (1984) definition of cultural capital is beyond dispute. If someone is brought up to know the difference between a phone and a camera and that these two items cannot be the same thing, then the possibility of a modern phone acting as a camera will never occur to them. This means that they might never consider actively looking for information on how to use the camera on their phone, regardless of how engaged they otherwise are with the technology.

Of course, in the above example, if the individual expends more engagement in finding out how to best use the modern phone, they will eventually discover that their phone can also take photos. This is where Bourdieu's concept requires flexibility, and this flexibility relates to the interpretation of an individual's engagement. Engagement is a form of practice that is the result of human emotion. Cottingham (2016, p. 352) described emotion as a form of capital that is 'a tripartite concept composed of emotion-based knowledge, management skills, and capacities to feel that links self-processes and resources to group membership and social location'. Within the Bourdieusian framework, emotional capital can be considered another form of cultural capital because emotion can be said to reflect an individual's everyday interaction with the social and cultural structure they were placed in (Erickson & Stacey, 2013).

This is where the critique of Bourdieu for being too 'rational' comes in (Theodosius, 2006). Humans are capable of rational and irrational actions and decisions, especially when it comes to emotion. Of course, this thesis does not deny that a great deal of our emotional capital is the result of the sociocultural structure (Erickson & Stacey, 2013). At the same time, although the concept of consumer steward is a social phenomenon, it is equally about an individual's identity. Granted, the identity of someone is formed through social interactions, but the individual to whom the identity belongs must first make a personal, sometimes emotional and irrational, decision about whom they want to be and initiate this desire through engagement. This means that the process involved might be more psychological than just emotional, involving 'irrational' notions like self-efficacy, hope, resiliency and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007). Hence, instead of emotional capital, one should actually call this psychological capital, which can be defined as '"who you are" and, in the developmental sense, "who you are becoming"' (Hussein & Amiruddin, 2020, p. 63).

Luthans et al. (2007), in a study on psychological capital, stated that self-efficacy is having the confidence and effort to complete the goal; hope is persevering and, if necessary, redirecting towards the goal; resilience is sustaining and bouncing back when facing obstacles on the path to the goal; and, last, optimism is about having a positive attitude regarding the present and the destination. All of these are linked to higher levels of engagement (Karatepe & Karadas, 2015), which is the source that makes consumer stewards possible.

In short, one limitation of the Bourdieusian framework is that it is rational almost to a fault (Theodosius, 2006). At the same time, since emotional capital is the embodiment of the social and cultural structure (Erickson & Stacey, 2013), the literature on emotional capital tends to focus on how emotion is rationally articulated (Cottingham, 2016). However, engagement is a

form of psychological behaviour that can be triggered by rational and irrational decision-making. The existing literature on Bourdieu and emotional capital is constructed around 'emotional experiences and management'. Emotional capital can be defined as 'a form of cultural capital that includes the emotion-specific, trans-situational resources that individuals activate and embody in distinct fields' (Cottingham, 2016, p. 451). However, this research suggests that the current definition of emotional capital cannot deal with irrational emotions such as self-efficacy, hope, resiliency and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007), for these qualities are evidently possessed by consumer stewards in abundance.

With regard to optimism, it has long been documented that people such as inventors, entrepreneurs and political and military leaders are optimistic individuals. Their decisions make a difference, and they 'play a disproportionate role in shaping our lives' (Kahneman, 2013, p. 266). For these individuals, optimism is always a mixed blessing, and in 'its grip, they make decisions based on delusional optimism rather than on a rational weighting of gains, losses, and probabilities' (Kahneman, 2013, p. 264). The scope of this study automatically eliminated individuals who had failed to become consumer stewards, either due to their lack of optimism or luck; thus, it is difficult to imagine that the three studied subjects (Lowko, PiG and Day9) had humble beginnings. However, at the end of the day, they initially were and still are consumers, and it was only through their high level of engagement with the brand that they were able to obtain stewardship.

In the traditional Bourdieusian framework, the social hierarchy is constructed of a combination of habitus and various volumes and combinations of capitals. It places great emphasis on the social and cultural structure and rational articulation of emotional capital. However, this approach cannot fully explain the irrational side of emotional capital, such as hope and optimism. In addition, since the digital space provides equality in opportunities, individuals' emotional responses towards such opportunities become incredibly important to their social status. By looking at the findings in Chapter 4, social class in the online community can be clearly divided based on one's level of engagement, that is, a combination of emotional and psychological capital that considers both rational and irrational reasoning processes. As a result, this research indicated that emotional capital should be expanded to psychological capital and include both the rational and irrational aspects of the human psyche. This approach would better explain what engagement is and better apply the Bourdieusian framework in the digital realm.

Furthermore, this study shows that emotional or psychological capital is separate from culture capital and that it should be treated as a fourth form of capital. After all, it behaves like capital,

and it can certainly be measured. The scoring method adopted in this study to identify the three consumer stewards is an example of how psychological capital can be measured and studied.

5.2.2.2.1. Engagement Capital as the Medium for Exchange with Power. In the existing literature on power, consumer power is exerted by those with the intention to defy the status quo. This intention is consumer stewards' engagement, which can be described and analysed using the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). This intention is ever-present in the phenomenon of consumer stewards; it is evident from this study that no consumer steward can achieve their ascension without conscious intent. Indeed, every aspect that is displayed in Figure 5.5 represents an element created through or in the service of executing consumer stewards' intent.

The literature review drew on Miller's (2005) five constructs of behaviour intent to expand engagement. In other words, behaviour intent or engagement can be predicted when one considers attitude towards behaviour, subject norms, social norms, perceived power and perceived behaviour control. Within the context of consumer stewards, their attitude towards behaviour is their opinion (i.e. narrative identity) regarding the brand, the brand owner and the brand community (McCreery & Best, 2004). The subject norms and social norms come from consumer stewards' social capital based on their fans' preferences (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) as well as cultural capital derived from their education and social upbringing (Bourdieu, 1984). The perceived power and perceived behaviour control are consumer stewards' economic capital and abilities based on their creative and education capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Trigg, 2004).

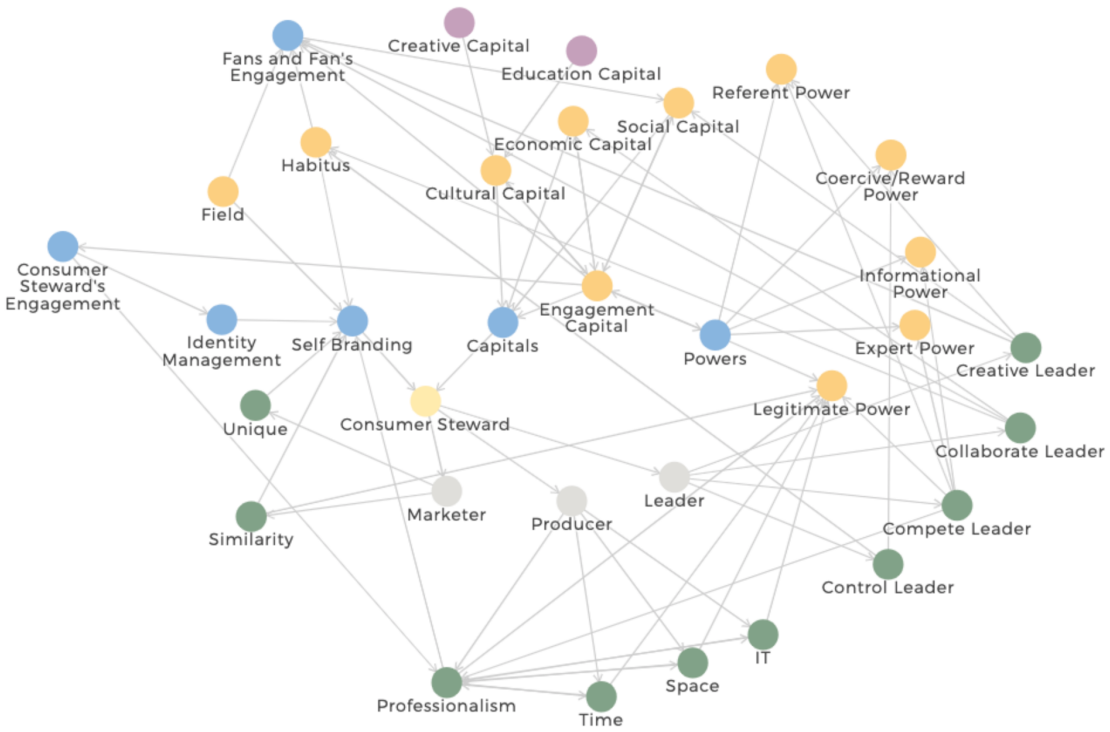
By using the theory of planned behaviour's constructs to analyse consumer stewards' engagement, two concepts can be derived when combined with the notion of engagement as capital. First, these constructs are able to further explore the nature of engagement. The difference between the three common forms of capital (cultural, economic and social) and engagement capital is that the first three can be explained as three separate notions. In contrast, engagement capital is derived from the combination of the three capitals plus the psychology of the individual. The reason traditional cultural capital cannot completely describe the irrational and/or emotional behaviour of an individual is that a human's behaviour intent is derived from more than just cultural capital; there are many internal and external factors and forces to consider (Miller & Howell, 2005).

Second, the exchange between capitals and powers is a crucial component of a consumer steward. Following the theory of planned behaviour, the mediator/initiator/facilitator of this exchange, insofar as the phenomenon of consumer steward is concerned, is engagement capital. Modern

consumer powers (regardless of form) are available to the large majority of consumers due to the advancements in ICT (Bakos, 1991; Roland & Richard, 1994; Seo, 2013). However, the exercise of such powers requires intent (i.e. engagement) on the part of individual consumers. Consumer stewards are individuals with high levels of engagement (i.e. behaviour intent). Therefore, engagement capital should be placed between other types of capital and power. As such, one could revise Figure 5.5, with engagement as a form of capital updated with relationships mentioned above, as shown in Figure 5.6 (which can be accessed online via the following link: https://onodo.org/visualizations/146287).

Figure 5.6

Components and Functions of Consumer Stewards with Engagement Capital



5.2.3. Research Question #3: Delicate Social Relationship

Research question #3 of this research was stated as follows:

- How do consumer stewards evolve our understanding of online community, social hierarchy and consumer-generated value?

At this point, it is helpful to remind ourselves how we define consumer stewards:

- *Highly visible members of the player community who enjoy high social capital and use this capital to obtain marketing attention and enhance co-creative opportunities between audiences, players and commercial interests*

In this section, we answer the research question by focusing on consumer stewards' social relationship with the brand, the brand owner and the brand community. To achieve this, this section is separated into two parts. The first part examines the practical implications of this study – in particular, the implications for corporations/brand owners, how they might more effectively treat consumer stewards as marketing agents, co-producers and governors/leaders and the potential benefits this could bring. The second part explores the theoretical implications, highlighting the social position consumer stewards hold within the online environment.

5.2.3.1. Practical Implications. This study on consumer stewards as a phenomenon brought many issues to the forefront. The question is how to use this newly acquired knowledge in meaningful and valuable ways. Therefore, this section focuses on the practical implications of this study, in particular, the marketing, production and governing implications.

5.2.3.1.1. Consumer Stewards as Marketing Agents. Identity plays a central role in the daily operations of consumer stewards. Consumer stewards must consistently manage their identity in the process of constructing and reconstructing social relationships (i.e. social capital) that allow them to be placed between the brand owner and other consumers. The key element is legitimacy or legitimate power (French & Raven, 1959), which is by no means easy to obtain. To achieve this self-branding, consumer stewards must maintain a delicate balance between creating individual uniqueness and identifying with a higher class. Consumer stewards must distinguish themselves from common consumers and be accepted as part of the dominant class.

Wang et al. (2022, p. 258) stated that,

> 'For consumer stewards to be able to talk about a brand and its marketing, regardless of whether the brand is their personal brand or another product brand, they must have the legitimacy to do so. This legitimacy requires recognition and acknowledgement from the fans as well as the brand itself. In this study, we saw that the consumer stewards who had already been acknowledged by the brand owner in one form or another – PiG and Day9 – had a much easier time acting as marketers. Meanwhile, Lowko, a newcomer, had no legitimate power and had to work very hard to achieve their eventual status'. (p. 258)

On the other hand, consumer stewards must prevent their narratives from becoming so similar to those of other stewards or commercial actors that they are practically indistinguishable. In

Lowko's dataset, the 3 January 2016 video, where Lowko was called a sell-out when showing favouritism towards a donor of €100, was clear evidence of this. The community dislikes people whose opinions can be easily swayed by money. Indeed, in the existing literature, we witnessed a similar case in which Marsha Collier refused to be paid by the company they were associated with in order to maintain their integrity (Tsai, 2007).

In summary, consumer stewards must demonstrate that their capacity to manage their roles is

> 'grounded in a legitimate connection to the community, a strong track record of participation in eSports and a broad acceptance by the community based on expertise and referent and informational powers. The ability to capture this capital and develop a keen individual identity that entertains and informs or tutors the community – almost as though consumer stewards are providing mentoring or community support – while carving out a celebrity-like presence lays the groundwork for attracting marketers' attention' (Wang et al., 2022, p. 258).

While in the role of marketers, consumer stewards are a conduit between the brand owner and other consumers. The reason they can occupy this position is that they have legitimate power (Raven, 1965).

> 'This means that it is not possible to enter the community or become a consumer steward through the agency of marketing support – that is, consumer stewards cannot be a marketing construct. The ambivalent stance of consumer stewards must be maintained through a series of careful balancing acts to preserve their personal legitimacy or capital in the eyes of the community and marketing interests.
>
> 'For consumer stewards to be able to talk about the brand and its marketing, regardless of whether the brand is the consumer steward's personal brand or another product brand, they must have the legitimacy to do so. This means that what a consumer steward needs is not necessarily economic capital from the brand owner but acknowledgement. In this sense, acknowledgement from the brand owner allows consumer stewards to gain much-needed legitimate power, enabling them to expand their influence within the community, increase their subscribers and attract more sponsors' (Wang et al., 2022, p. 258).

After all, a consumer steward is a brand-oriented creature; they live on the brands they build up and associate with. From this perspective, monetary sponsorship is good, but free acknowledgement from the brand owner is much more valuable – at least in the eyes of consumer stewards. For brand owners who want to use consumer stewards as marketing agents, the aim

should be to locate consumer stewards from their own brand communities and then acknowledge their presence within the community and the important roles they perform. This not only builds loyalty between the brand owner and consumer stewards; it is also by far one of the cheapest and most effective forms of marketing.

However, it is equally important for any brand owner to take note of this study's statement about the delicate balance consumer stewards must maintain to function as effective marketers. Consumer stewards' role as marketers is different from our traditional understanding of celebrity branding (Barron, 2007) because they have to create their uniqueness by themselves to affect change in their social trajectory (Bourdieu, 1984). For this reason, conferring legitimacy from the brand owner to consumer stewards should only be done to acknowledge the service consumer stewards perform to the brand and the community while maintaining a clear distance between consumer stewards and the brand owner.

5.2.3.1.2. Consumer Stewards as Co-producers. Consumer stewards' identity and success rely on a delicate balance between being an accepted member of a brand community and an independent, knowledgeable individual. The brand community is important to the brand owner because of the benefits such a community brings to the brand. Bapna et al. (2019) listed such benefits as including increased brand awareness, brand building, positive word of mouth, increased financial rewards, consumer satisfaction and loyalty. However, for brands to benefit in these ways, their online communities must have a large membership and a large volume of communication activity that maintain an online social structure (Butler, 2001).

Often, membership size, in particular, is seen as the most important determinant of an online community's influence; since 'members are a primary source of resources, the size of a structure's membership provides a measure of resource availability' (Butler, 2001, p. 348). Indeed, failure to reach a critical mass of supporters can directly contribute to the downfall of a company. For example, in August 2020, Warner Brothers' DC Universe, a content streaming service, was reportedly absorbed by another streaming service, HBO Max, due to its failure to attract enough subscribers to support its continued stand-alone operations, which resulted in massive layoffs at DC Comics (Randolph, 2020).

However, the brand owner often has inadequate levels of ongoing communication after it has attracted a large following because growing an online community requires 'a large volume of communication activity or content' (Bapna et al., 2019, p. 425). These communication activities have to be started by someone, as does the content. While the originator of these communities can be a brand owner, it is more likely to be a member of a consumer group who has a high level

of engagement with the brand. This is because the volume of communication and content needed for a community to develop cannot be created by a brand owner alone – it also requires consumer-created content (Cova & Salle, 2008).

Therefore, from the perspective of the brand owner or its production team, consumer stewards contribute to a great deal of content development without the brand owner incurring any cost. This effect is reminiscent of a study by Szkuta et al. (2014). They found that since more government service activities have gone digital, 'the e-government services co-produced by citizens start to appear, often without the support, acknowledgement and even awareness of the government' (p. 558). As a result, instead of traditional government service, they suggested that open, collaborative delivery creates an open dialogue with the public, thereby creating a better service to the community.

A similar argument can be made and an approach can be taken regarding a brand owner's relationship with consumer stewards of the brand community. Since consumer stewards already produce a large volume of content in the community, a collaborative approach serves the interests of many parties, such as consumer stewards themselves, brand owners and the brand communities. In Chapter 4, collaborative work between consumer stewards and their fans was shown to increase fans' engagement and consumer stewards' social capital and referent power. If this collaboration were to be between consumer stewards and the brand owner, the legitimate power of consumer stewards would undoubtedly increase, not to mention that the brand owner would also receive a boost in referent power. In addition, this collaboration would allow the brand owner to influence how their brand is framed in consumer stewards' content.

However, as emphasised at the end of the previous section, the delicate balance that allows consumer stewards' shift in social trajectory must be respected by the brand owner. This study demonstrated that the value of consumer stewards lies in their identity construction and self-branding. Therefore, if the brand owner imposes too much of their own identity on consumer stewards, it might result in a loss of the consumer stewards' uniqueness that made them attractive and easily identifiable by their followers, thus reducing their overall value.

5.2.3.1.3. Consumer Stewards Officially Acting as Governor/Leader. As previously pointed out, consumer stewards have to maintain a tight social relationship balance between brand owners and followers. Indeed, this relationship management is comparable to the vicious world of politics. To explain, we begin by being a little fanciful in our imagination. In the book *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a position of office called the Stewards of Gondor. The very first stewards were the chief high councillors to the kings of Gondor and then the rulers of

Gondor. The stewards' purpose is to govern the country until the return of the rightful ruler, King Aragorn II Elessar. The stewards have never sat on the king's throne; rather, they sit on a simple chair of black stone placed below it. Indeed, in the book (as well as in the subsequent movie, *The Two Towers*), one asks how long must pass before a steward can become king, assuming the king does not return. The other replies: '[A] few years, maybe, in other places of less royalty … In Gondor ten thousand years would not suffice' (Tolkien, 1991).

The Lord of the Rings is, of course, a classic in Western literature. In Asia, one of the four great classical novels of Chinese literature is called *Water Margin*. The story is set in the Song dynasty, and it is about a group of outlaws fighting against the corruption within the Emperor's government. Eventually, they are granted amnesty by the government, march against foreign invaders and suppress rebel forces (Naian, 2010). Being one of the most famous novels in Chinese, it has been highly promoted by Chinese governments past and present. This is because of the single message promoted in the book: the outlaws are fighting against corruption within the government but not the government itself (Fitzgerald, 1986).

What is common within these two narratives? In Western society, when a ruler or government is absent, it is natural for someone to take charge temporarily. Society will accept this stewardship as long as it does not seek to replace the ruler. In Asian society, even when the emperor is still present, it is acceptable for one to fight against corruption within the government so long as one does not seek to replace the government. Now, these two novels are located in realms of fancy, yet the fact that they have been accepted by Western and Asian cultures alike means that they are a reflection of reality.

These two narratives speak of the hierarchies in society and the legitimacy of the dominant class in the minds of ordinary people. They also speak of a unique social position that exists when the ruler's presence, being absolute and unmoveable, is close enough to infer legitimacy but far enough to be unable to make a direct or just ruling. This social position is the stewardship that governs the community in place of the ruler; perhaps more interestingly, the ruler does not give it – it is seized/obtained through the actions of unique individuals.

Following the logic of this narrative, this study found that consumer stewards occupy such a position and can potentially function as a legitimate form of a governing body. Legitimate, in this case, is defined as a governing body recognised by the state (for example, a brand owner). Indeed, the consumer stewards in this study already established themselves as a faction of the dominant class and satisfied the definition of legitimacy. What if the brand owner appoints a group of consumer stewards as the legitimate governing body of the brand community?

To appoint consumer stewards as the legitimate governing body of the brand community is for the brand owner to give recognition to consumer stewards. The brand owner can accomplish this by providing consumer stewards with acknowledgement, appreciation and approval (Glasscock & Gram, 1995). However, none of those actions implies shifting control from the brand owner to consumer stewards. Maintaining this control is absolutely necessary for a brand because it can potentially reduce negative press, manipulate community opinion and increase marketing and co-production of the brand material without any increase in cost, like the king in the stories of fancy.

Hence, recognition, in this case, requires tact from the brand owner. Consumer stewards, in the end, are not the brand owner's employees, so they do not have any obligation to follow orders from the brand owner. At the same time, acknowledgement and recognition are like any other publicity – they are completed once the brand owner gives them. Conceivably, the brand owner could withdraw their recognition afterwards, but such a thing is rarely done due to the potentially negative publicity it would generate. Indeed, there is even a chance for consumer stewards to be painted as heroes against evil corporate control, like in the case of Bitzchung versus Blizzard Entertainment mentioned in the literature review (Gonzalez, 2019). On the other hand, if the brand owner's denouncement were to be carried out quietly, no one would know about it, which would render the denouncement pointless.

As such, it can be suggested that instead of recognition that can only be given once and right away, the brand owner could give periodic recognition. Consumer stewards would be told that they are in the running for recognition months in advance. This is similar to the selection and appointment of student council members for a university. The university appoints students for the current year with the promise of a certificate of recognition at the end.

However, this requires another kind of balance from the brand owner. Periodic recognition can easily be interpreted as an ongoing competition between consumer stewards. Unfortunately, a thoughtless increase in the level of competition could have a negative effect. As seen in Chapter 4, consumer stewards need to be competitive and collaborative. Past scholars found that an unbalanced reward system can lead to a strong social comparison, thus resulting in the subject engaging in a 'search for difference rather than similarities' and giving rise to 'emotional discomfort' (Henagan, 2010, p. 65). Since we have already argued that consumer stewards must tread a delicate path between similarity and uniqueness, if the brand owner were to intervene and break this balance, it may cause harm to consumer stewards and the community.

5.2.3.2. Theoretical Implications: Consumer Stewards' Social Position. This section highlights consumer stewards' role as the instigators of the real in otherwise virtual environments. They construct the narrative (Watson, 2009), create an identity (Popescu, 2019) and reality (Kashima, 2014) for all to share, establish rule and power structures (Zhu, 2012) for all to follow, generate various forms of capital (Bourdieu, 2011) and exchange various forms of power (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965) to develop and maintain the unity of the digital brand community (Katz & Heere, 2013).

5.2.3.2.1. The Online Social Hierarchy Has a Volatile Nature. The very concept of an elite or dominant class, by definition, means that there is limited space available. If there were no barriers for a person to become part of the dominant class, then the dominant class would lose all its meaning. One could describe being part of the dominant class in an online community as swimming up-current. You will likely be washed away if you cannot output the same amount of engagement as consumer stewards (Day9TV, 2020). This finding provides insight into the nature of an online hierarchy and lends support to earlier findings on digital community behaviour (Steinmetz, 2018; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

For example, in the literature review, it was indicated that individuals (i.e. online celebrities/consumer stewards) were forced to do or say ridiculous or extreme things to maintain and acquire popularity (Steinmetz, 2018). In the case study, Day9 moved away from *StarCraft II* content creation because they could create more videos with the same effort when playing other games (Day9TV, 2020). Both examples highlight the difficulties of staying relevant in the online community and further indicate that engagement, or proof of engagement, plays a big part in staying relevant. To further emphasise this idea, we can draw upon iControl's passing and how, after their untimely death, their fan base moved to other YouTubers, who stepped into the space iControl left behind.

5.2.3.2.2. Consumer Stewards: The Physical Essence in a Virtual World. One factor contributing to the online environment's volatile nature is its lack of physical essence. This can create an obstacle when forming an online brand community. After all, a brand community is a group of individuals expressing their common interests and identity by purchasing a common product or brand. The lack of physical essence means there are no direct means for a community member to express their engagement with the product. In the existing literature, many studies focused on a brand community with a physical world presence, such as cars, motorbikes, fashion and music (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Barron, 2007; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The consumers of these products can more easily demonstrate their brand engagement.

On the other hand, what about digital gaming products? For this study, *StarCraft II* was an appropriate choice because it has clear community interaction, that is, the brand has been at the forefront of eSports. However, what about other single-player electronic games? How and where could a fan of these brands express their engagement when the product's nature is 'isolation'? This isolation is a social problem, as it has been a scholarly concern for many years. If we look at early studies on electronic gaming, one persistent theme is electronic gaming in relation to social skills, loneliness and emotional development (Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2004; Young, 2009a). Recently, we saw that an increasing number of scholars recognise that electronic gaming can have benefits in creating social interaction (Cuiñas & Sánchez, 2022). Yet, a problem few have answered is how a gamer can create social interaction with an electronic game that does not promote social interaction (e.g. a single-player game).

Our study on consumer stewards provides a solution to this problem. In our research on the consumer stewards' presence on other social media platforms, we looked at their Twitch.TV channels and discovered that, on average, they play host to 55 different games, many of which are single-player games (see Appendix E). This finding provides insight into the significant service consumer stewards perform within the brand community. In this case, our findings showed that consumer stewards resolve the lack of physical essence of a digital brand/product by providing both a virtual location (a place for spectating gameplay) and a narrative (consumer stewards' views on the game) for the brand community members to gather. This suggests that when studying a brand community in an increasingly digitalised world, one needs to seek out those virtual gathering spaces, especially the host(s) behind those virtual spaces, because these individuals may have contributed more to the operations of the brand community than anyone realises.

5.2.3.2.3. Consumer Stewards and Online Relationship/Narrative Management.

The volatile nature of an online community and the important social position consumer stewards occupy suggest that consumer stewards also occupy an intricate space between brand owners and general consumers. It is like walking a tightrope between the favour of the brand owner and the need to appeal to the community. For example, the brand owner, Blizzard Entertainment, might not have selected Lowko as one of the top community members (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019) or hired PiG and Day9 as casters of the official game (Liquipedia, 2020a, 2020c) if they were perceived to have often criticised the company or the brand. Being able to criticise the brand that a fan loves is not unusual, as we saw in the existing literature (Gonzalez, 2019; McWhertor, 2018). Indeed, this study suggests that the community

would have a negative view of a consumer steward who becomes a mouthpiece for the rich and powerful (e.g. the brand owner; LowkoTV, 2020b).

An example of this can be seen when Lowko received a substantial donation from one of his fans. This led to Lowko giving this fan some words of appreciation, which sparked a conversation about appearing to be a sell-out, with the community quickly responding in a joking manner with phrases such as 'shit storm incoming' (LowkoTV, 2020b). The consumer stewards selected for this study displayed good relationship management to avoid such controversy. However, the example of Lowko can still serve as a warning and an indication of how quickly the community can respond and turn on consumer stewards.

In a broad sense, this provides even more insight into the volatile nature of the online environment. In both the existing literature (Steinmetz, 2018; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) and our case studies (see Chapter 4), we saw that the online community could quickly turn against those in power but come to their aid just as rapidly. However, this volatile nature can be manipulated and controlled to a certain degree. The findings of this research also suggest an approach for how an individual might navigate an online environment that is filled with criticism towards them and survive and grow in influence. We labelled this as the host narrative approach, in which the narrative is the key.

In the digital environment, if the virtual location is where people gather and the hosts of these locations are the creators of the narrative, then these hosts naturally have implications for how the message will be interpreted by the audience. These individuals (e.g. consumer stewards) become especially important if we seek to study, predict or even manipulate the effect that critical communication might have on the online community. For example, this study looked at three content hosts and studied their effect on the brand community. In the instance of Lowko and the donation, this was played out in a joking and cheerful manner because of the narrative Lowko presented to the followers (LowkoTV, 2020b). Therefore, one could argue that the mood and interpretation of the message were manipulated to the host's advantage. Likewise, with regard to the disaster that occurred as part of the announcement of the mobile game *Diablo Immortal*, the recorded video still exists today, carrying a negative narrative against the brand owner by the host of the video (Nexius, 2018), which provides a clear indication of why the brand owner's stock fell days after the event (Tassi, 2018). This finding has important implications for understanding online relationship management, virtual marketing and digital content management.

5.2.4. Summary of the Discussion

The discussion focused on answering the three research questions and highlighting the three findings that emerged from this research. The three findings can be summarised as follows:

- Finding #1: The composition and function of consumer stewards. This study identified the important components that make up consumer stewards and discussed their functions in the brand community. This can be described using the equation: SB ⇔ Cs = CS ⇒ LR ∧ MR ∧ PR.
- Finding #2: Engagement as capital. This study explained why engagement capital might potentially improve Bourdieu's social theory within the online environment. In addition, it explained engagement capital's composition and function within the phenomenon of consumer stewards. Engagement capital's position in presented in Figure 5.6.
- Finding #3: Consumer stewards walk a tightrope between the favour of the brand owner and the need to appeal to the community. By highlighting the practical and theoretical implications, this research highlighted the delicate balance between the brand owner and brand community that consumer stewards are required to maintain in order to survive within the volatile online environment.

In Chapter 6, the summary, limitations, suggestions for future research and conclusions will be presented.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore a unique modern consumer group, which we labelled consumer stewards. Consumer stewards are unique because, while they are consumers at the core, they have evolved beyond the classic definition of a consumer. This last chapter provides an overview of the entire study. In addition, it presents a discussion on the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

6.1. Thesis Overview

In Chapter 1, we examined figures who emerged from within the virtual community, a new breed of online celebrities that have achieved this new social status through the everyday consumption of particular brands. This study labelled these individuals as consumer stewards. Consumer stewards can be defined as highly visible members of the player community who enjoy high social capital and use this capital to obtain marketing attention and enhance co-creative opportunities between audiences, players and commercial interests. Some important attributes associated with consumer stewards are essential to our understanding. First, consumer stewards are still consumers, a fact that distinguishes consumer stewards from traditional influencers/celebrities. For example, a movie actor, a regular celebrity who is already famous due to their vocation, can influence others through the brands they consume. Consumer stewards, on the other hand, become celebrities because of the brands they consume. This leads to consumer stewards' second attribute: they are producers by their consumption, meaning they are capable of generating value rather than merely consuming. Third, as their creations spread through online communities, consumer stewards also play the role of marketers. They market their identity as a brand and they market the brand they consume. Finally, this identity construction inevitably makes consumer stewards stand out within the consumer group, making them leaders within their brand communities.

In order to study the phenomenon of consumer stewards, three research questions were asked:

1. What are the practices of consumer stewards within the context of an online consumer community?
2. What are the constraining or enabling factors/rules within community norms and behaviours that govern consumer stewards' practices?
3. How do consumer stewards evolve our understanding of online community, social hierarchy and consumer-generated value?

In Chapter 2, we examined the five scholarly fields, separated into two sections, that this study used to construct a conceptual framework around the phenomenon of consumer stewards. The first section identified where consumer stewards are located within the existing scholarly field. Consumer stewards are part of consumer culture theory and consumer identity projects. To establish this, consumer culture theory was first used to highlight consumer stewards as unique consumers with high engagement with brands, brand owners and brand communities (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Sigamoney, 2016). Next, the existing literature on the construction and reconstruction of identity (Popescu, 2019) and narrative creation (Watson, 2009) were used to emphasise that identity construction is important to understand consumer stewards. In the second section, the existing literature on how consumer stewards interact with the brands, brand owners and brand communities was examined. First, we looked at Pierre Bourdieu's social theory. This research showed that consumer stewards' social position is determined by the field and habitus they occupy and the combination of various volumes and forms of capital they possess. In addition, it identified that becoming a consumer steward represents a shift in one's social position from an ordinary consumer to a higher social class (Bourdieu, 1984). Second, was the literature on power. Consumer stewards occupy a position of influence, and the literature informed us that consumers must exercise various forms of power to gain that position (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965). This exercise represents active engagement or 'intent' on the part of the consumer stewards. The theory of planned behaviour was used to explain how consumer stewards exchange capitals and powers (Ajzen, 1991). Third, the existing literature on consumers and media was explored, focusing on eSports in particular. The advancement in ICT allows consumers to evolve and develop a high level of engagement with brands and enables them to negotiate power with the brand owners in the form of popularity and connectivity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

In Chapter 3, an eSports documentary film study and a netnographic methodology were used to study the online community consumer stewards occupy (Kozinets, 2010b). The eSports documentary, which included interviews with brand owners and consumer stewards, provided a behind-the-scenes perspective that would have been hard to obtain otherwise. Netnography was used to explore how consumer stewards engage with the brand, the brand owners and the brand communities through their cultural product.

In Chapter 4, the findings derived from the documentary film study and the netnographic methodology were presented. The documentary provided important insights into the difficult relationships between consumer stewards, brand owners and brand communities that consumer

stewards have to maintain at all times to become successful. It also highlighted that engagement may require consumer stewards to make personal sacrifices and commitments. The findings from the netnographic approach highlighted various ways in which consumer stewards successfully manage the delicate relationship between brand owners and brand communities.

In Chapter 5, the findings were analysed, and the three research questions were answered. The study found that (1) the composition and function of consumer stewards provide a roadmap to research this phenomenon, (2) engagement should be considered as another form of capital, and its purpose is to function as initiator of exchange between other forms of capital and power and (3) the delicate social position of consumer stewards is important to the successful application of consumer stewards, both in practical and theoretical applications.

6.2. Implications

There are various implications that emerged from this research. First, this study was able to identify the practices of consumer stewards in a visual form (see Figure 5.5). This provides a roadmap for any future studies on the phenomenon. It outlines both what allowed the emergence of consumer stewards and the functions they perform within the community. This advances the current understanding of online consumer communities and the complex social interactions within them.

Second, this research identified the role engagement plays in the phenomenon of consumer stewards. One of the gaps in the existing literature this study identified is a lack of clarity on the medium by which powers and capitals are exchanged. This research found that engagement, or more specifically, engagement as capital, is the medium for the exchange. This is because to use capital to exchange powers or exercise power to accumulate capital requires *intent* (i.e. engagement). As a result, the roadmap for consumer stewards can be updated to include engagement as capital (see Figure 5.6).

Third, this study allowed a deep understanding of the social position of consumer stewards. Practically, it provided insight into how best to approach these unique groups of individuals from a marketing, governance and co-producer perspective. Theoretically, this study highlighted the importance of online relationship/narrative management for consumer stewards. Additionally, when this narrative management is done correctly, consumer stewards are the physical essence of the virtual world. They construct the environment (i.e. field and habitus) for the brand community to gather around.

6.3. Limitations

The data/participation selection method could be considered biased. In this study, the scoring method used to measure consumer stewards' expression of engagement was based on a qualitative data category. To determine what counted as an expression of engagement and how many applied for each potential consumer steward, the method relied heavily on the researcher's understanding of the *StarCraft II* community. Although an attempt was made to apply equal treatment to all potential subjects, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the author had more knowledge about some potential consumer stewards than about others. As a result of this prior knowledge, items in categories such as legitimacy (e.g. accomplishment) were easier to identify for some potential subjects than for others.

The current research on consumer stewards only focuses on one specific eSport brand and does not consider the diversity of cultural contexts. This can create biases in data selection, especially considers the concept of identity is at the core of this thesis, which is the result of narrative creation within a particular set of social sphere (McCreery & Best, 2004). Hence, a comparative approach across diverse cultural contexts can enhance generalizability and uncover insights into how cultural factors influence expressions of engagement within online communities.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to compare and contrast findings across other social media platforms to gain a broader understanding of consumer behaviour beyond the StarCraft II community or the platform YouTube, Facebook or Twitter. This approach can identify commonalities and differences in engagement behaviours across different online platforms, enriching this study's findings and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of online consumer behaviour.

Finally, this research only used secondary data and employed a mixed methodology involving quantitative and qualitative in its analysis. Collecting primary data through surveys and interviews can provide first-hand data and address the limitation of relying solely on qualitative data categories and the researcher's subjective understanding. By incorporating the actual perceptions of consumers towards consumer stewards, the result can potentially provide deeper insights into the factors driving engagement and legitimacy within online communities. Utilizing research tools like surveys and interviews can allow for a more nuanced exploration and investigation of consumer stewards phenomena.

6.4. Recommendations

The results of this study have important implications for both practice and theory. In terms of practice, this study provided guidance for future marketing and brand management. The concept

of consumer stewards has two practical effects: (1) brand expansion and (2) brand community development. This is achieved through consumer stewards performing their various roles (leader, marketer and co-producer). As leaders, they promote followers' engagement with the brand and brand owners. As marketers, they advertise existing and future products, impacting others' purchasing behaviours. As co-producers, they help to develop brand-related content within the brand community with their user-generated content. Therefore, it would be a waste to only consider consumer stewards as an advertising tool when their powers in community development are equally, if not more, potent. Thus, future marketing research should consider using consumer stewards more towards brand development than merely brand advertisement.

Furthermore, this study found that narrative management can help control criticism in the online environment. One question that arises from the findings is what indicator(s) should be used and/or how long one should monitor media content before it becomes a good predictor of community opinion. For example, one cannot assume that the narrative of the content host is the same as the narrative of public opinion, which is why, in this study, both consumer stewards' messages and audience feedback had to be coded. In addition, this study demonstrated that although the message content the creator embeds clearly influences the message received and responded to, it is never a direct translation. So, what could be considered a good indicator of audience opinion? Additionally, how much weight should we assign to such an opinion? All of these issues create fascinating research questions for future research.

Another question is how to manipulate online public opinion through media content. Is the persuasive message embedded within the media content enough? Or should one use a more blatant/underhanded method, like those covered in the literature review (e.g. review bombing), and facilitate the 'desirable' narrative on one's own? In this study, considerable time was devoted to gathering audience feedback on each video. We saw that every video had several top comments (see Chapter 3). These comments received the highest audience 'likes'. It can be assumed that these comments represented prevalent public opinion. However, since anyone can create these comments and have the potential to be 'liked' by anyone, one must ask whether one can manipulate online public opinion by manufacturing desirable comments. The practicality of this is questionable, since only one account or one IP address can make a single 'like' on a comment. It is possible to create a computer bot and program it to create many accounts to generate those 'likes', but many social platforms these days use human verification in order to prevent such methods. Naturally, it is also possible for a human to do this manually, but one soon runs into the question of how many accounts are enough. The mere consideration of this

idea would create a statistical nightmare. In short, even if possible, it is another right reserved for the privileged. This line of questions opens new doors in psychology and online community research and other interesting, if not disturbing, questions on power and persuasion in the online environment.

Theoretically, this study examined the existence and role of consumer stewards within the digital environment, the online community's power and capital structure and the modern application of Bourdieu's social theory within the digital space. Arising from all the findings was that one concept is present from the beginning to the end: engagement. It is the firm belief of the researcher that engagement as capital is an extremely important component when studying online communities, especially if the goal is to understand the digital social environment and the social hierarchy therein. As such, this study recommended that any future research should include engagement as part of their online study analysis and even consider the plausibility of adding engagement as the fourth capital. Engagement, being the combination of both psychological and emotional capital, certainly invites discussion regarding the future application of Bourdieu's social theory.

The phenomenon of consumer stewards also improves any future study of Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus. According to Bourdieu (1984), both field and habitus are created by the social structure and the distribution and value of capitals. It is possible for both field and habitus to change or be replaced, but since they are formed through collective consciousness, it would take a long time. However, what is unique and new about consumer stewards is that they are capable of creating their own field (structure of social space), a field made from their very own social identity (Kashima, 2014) and reality (Sankarasubramanyan & Wasundhara, 2013).

Normally, an individual's field would be too small for it to have any bearing on Bourdieusian theory at all. However, when this individual becomes one with a field as large as that possessed by a consumer steward, it becomes much more potent in its influence. One way to test this is to consider what Bourdieu (1984, p. 101) said about lifestyle. He stated that lifestyle is the combination of habitus and field. When we look at the data collected in the current study, we can ask the following questions: Have the fans of consumer stewards expressed that they live in the field created by consumer stewards, and have they lived by the rules established by consumer stewards? The answer is 'yes'. For instance, we see that when Lowko created their own catchphrase ('Don't forgot to smile, alright'), the fans absorbed it, or perhaps were absorbed by it. When Lowko forgot to say the catchphrase, it impacted the fans' behaviour (LowkoTV, 2020b).

The fact that consumer stewards can create their own field and habitus makes all the difference to the Bourdieusian framework. First, it means that habitus can change, even though the collective consciousness within the field is against it, such as in the case of Day9's withdrawal from the *StarCraft* community (Day9TV, 2020). Such a thought alone would naturally be considered a betrayal by other members of the community, not to mention actually doing it. Yet, Day9 accomplished this and still remains in their position as a steward to their brand tribe. In Chapter 4, we argued that the legitimate power Day9 built up allowed them to change habitus while maintaining influence in the community. Another way to interpret the same data is that, since Day9 was the one who created the habitus in the first place, they naturally had a legitimate right to change it. This process is similar to what happens in the world of politics. To change laws in a democracy, one needs to pass them through congress or parliament, while to change the laws in a monarchy, all one needs is a nod from the king or, in this case, a steward. Of course, the problem with a monarchy is that if the king/steward vanishes, chaos ensues, while in a democracy, silencing one voice is never enough. Since consumer stewards created the field, if they pass away, like in the case of iControl (Day9TV, 2020), the field they created can quickly be dissolved and replaced by another or many others who occupy the same social space.

It must be emphasised that the research presented in this study demonstrated the applicability of Bourdieu (1984) theory to the analyses of the phenomenon of consumer stewards, particularly the usefulness of the concepts of habitus and field. This study found that the field and habitus created by consumer stewards change, disappear and are replaced at an extremely rapid pace in the online environment. This can be related to the volatile nature of the online environment. An implication of this finding is that to ensure the accuracy of any understanding of the status of consumer stewards, it is necessary to continuously or regularly take account of any changes that may affect the field and the habitus created by consumer stewards. To those who seek to study and make use of consumer stewards, this is undoubtedly a time-consuming task. On the other hand, to any student of Bourdieu, the phenomenon of consumer stewards provides a demonstration of the Bourdieusian framework on speed dial – something that one normally needs to wait for years to see can be observed and studied in the space of a few months, perhaps less. This can drastically reduce research time and cost.

6.5. Conclusion

This study established that consumer stewards play an important role within the brand community. They possess power, capital and status that place them as a new component of the dominant class. Above all, they possess a high level of psychological capital that makes them a

positive force within any brand community. This study examined the construction, implications and challenges consumer stewards present for our understanding of the digital community, using a Bourdieusian framework, and provided theoretical and practical contributions. What is most fascinating is that even after 40 years, while society has migrated largely from the physical to the digital space, a Bourdieusian framework is still highly relevant and useful for the analysis and explanation of a modern phenomenon such as consumer stewards.

The various roles consumer stewards play, the various fields they occupy and the many lives and identities they influence are all impressive evidence of their existence. In short, their impact on our society is prodigious, and thus, consumer stewards are here to stay, and they will leave an even deeper mark on our society as time goes on. Therefore, consumer stewards deserve or even demand scholarly attention. Studying them may be a difficult and time-consuming task, but that is precisely why they make such a fascinating subject, one that is worthy of the attention of the best scholars. At a time like this, we can recollect the famous words of Sherlock Holmes: ‘There’s the scarlet thread of murder running through the colourless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it’ (Doyle, 1887, p. 20).

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Appendixes

All Appendixes can be accessed and download at:

https://1drv.ms/u/s!ArWpxNb0yL6wtHsoLR6Atv3zAhnb?e=soqUib

Appendix A Consumer Stewards of the *StarCraft II* Community

Appendix B Participants Collection

Appendix C Three Consumer Stewards

Appendix D.1 Data Collection LowkoTV

Appendix D.2 Data Collection Pig

Appendix D.3 Data Collection Day9TV

Appendix E Media Presence of 34 Participants

Appendix F Tables and Figures