From AI to We: Automation as the Bridge to Online Brand Communities

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of artificial intelligence on user engagement and brand relationship formation within streaming platforms, using Self-Determination Theory as a framework. It evaluates four AI-driven mechanisms—personalization, gamification, anthropomorphism, and homophily—and their role in automating brand relationships and fostering participation in online brand communities. A two-wave survey of 315 streaming service subscribers reveals that personalization, gamification, and anthropomorphism significantly enhance brand relationship automation, while homophily shows no direct effect. Automation acts as a key mediator, translating individual motivations into collective brand engagement. The findings underscore the importance of AI-enabled experiences in promoting psychological fulfilment, loyalty, and brand advocacy. Despite limitations related to self-reported, cross-sectional data and contextual specificity, the study offers actionable insights for designing intelligent, community-oriented platforms. It calls for future research to adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches and to address ethical considerations in consumer–AI interactions.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Streaming Platforms; Self-Determination Theory; Personalization; Gamification; Anthropomorphism; Brand Relationships; Online Brand Communities.

1. Introduction

In an era where digital transformation has profoundly reshaped consumer behaviour, streaming platforms have emerged as key arenas for a fundamental shift, not only in how individuals consume entertainment, but also in how they engage with brands (Löhnert, 2022). What began as a technological solution for content delivery, has evolved into an immersive, emotionally rich ecosystem, where artificial intelligence curates personalized and socially resonant experiences (Oluwademilade et al., 2024). These platforms no longer simply serve media; they shape identities, foster community, and redefine engagement, blurring the boundaries between technology and human connection (Hermann and Puntoni, 2024). Among them, Netflix stands as a prime exemplar (Davidson et al., 2010). Its global reach and sophisticated AI-driven recommendation engines illustrate how digital systems can move beyond content suggestions to craft personalized storylines (Deterding et al., 2011), facilitate social discovery, introduce game-like interactions (Hamari et al., 2014), and even mimic human sensitivity to individual needs and emotions (Suryavanshi et al., 2022). Each user interaction becomes a narrative thread, contributing not only to what is watched, but also to who the user is, who they aspire to be, and how they relate to others with shared tastes and values (Obiegbu and Larsen, 2024).

The study of digital transformation in streaming platforms has evolved considerably, Researchers are increasingly focusing on how AI fundamentally reshapes user experiences and business models (Barnes and Ruyter, 2022). Arshad et al. (2025) demonstrate that big data analytics and AI serve as critical success factors for online video streaming platforms, enabling the acquisition of vast amounts of user data about viewing habits, preferences, and behaviours, which AI subsequently utilises to deliver more suitable content and enhanced recommendations (Enholm et al., 2021).

This transformation extends beyond mere technological implementation to encompass fundamental changes in how platforms conceptualise user engagement and community building. Recent investigations have revealed that AI-driven streaming services experience radical expansion through the incorporation of sophisticated analytics that improve user interfaces, enhance functionality, and enable unprecedented levels of content personalisation (Arshad et al., 2025). Ahmed and Aziz (2024) further demonstrate that AI-enhanced video streaming services significantly shape user experiences through AI-based recommendations, with personalisation emerging as a critical factor influencing customer satisfaction in digital entertainment landscapes. Similarly, Mokoena and Obagbuwa (2025) illustrate how AI automation in digital music streaming platforms transforms consumer subscription behaviours through personalised music recommendations, dynamic pricing models, and marketing automation, showcasing the revolutionary impact of AI across diverse streaming contexts. These developments have prompted scholars to examine not only the technical capabilities of AI in streaming contexts, but also the psychological and social implications of increasingly intelligent content curation systems.

This evolution raises pressing questions about the nature of brand relationships in AI-mediated environments. How does artificial intelligence turn passive consumption into active participation? (Hollebeek et al., 2024) Through which psychological mechanisms do users form emotional attachments to algorithmic systems? (Yang and Oshio, 2025) And crucially, can automated processes truly satisfy fundamental human needs for autonomy, competence, and social relatedness, needs traditionally fulfilled through interpersonal interaction (Bergdahl et al., 2023; Hollebeek et al., 2024) These are not merely theoretical concerns; they represent vital challenges for organizations striving to build meaningful, durable brand engagement in an increasingly algorithmic marketplace (Hermann and Puntoni, 2024).

To address these questions, we draw upon SDT, developed by Deci and Ryan (1985) and further refined in subsequent decades. SDT posits that optimal motivation and psychological well-being arise when three basic needs are fulfilled: autonomy (the need for self-direction), competence (the need for efficacy), and relatedness (the need for connection and belonging) (Ryan and Deci, 2020). When applied to AI-driven platforms, SDT offers a robust framework to understand how digital systems can facilitate not just efficient interactions but deeply engaging and emotionally meaningful experiences (Bergdahl et al., 2023). It provides a theoretical lens through which to distinguish AI applications that succeed in fostering genuine engagement from those that remain functionally useful but emotionally sterile.

This study explores how artificial intelligence redefines user engagement in streaming platforms by focusing on four key mechanisms: personalisation, gamification, anthropomorphism, and homophily. We investigate how these AI-enabled features operate to transform streaming platforms from passive content delivery systems into emotionally resonant and socially immersive brand ecosystems, leading to the automation of brand relationships, a process through which AI technologies not only facilitate engagement but also deepen its emotional, social, and relational dimensions (McLean et al., 2021). Finally, this automation, substituting human interaction, serves to complement and amplify it, enabling users to experience more meaningful and sustained relationships with both platform content and brand communities.

Importantly, this article offers a comprehensive exploration of how AI is reshaping the contours of human-brand interaction. The implications of this research extend well beyond the streaming sector (Enholm et al., 2021). They offer valuable insights for scholars examining the psychology of AI adoption (Chaturvedi et al., 2025) and provide actionable guidance for practitioners seeking to design intelligent platforms that nurture sustained user engagement (Amershi et al., 2019). More broadly, our findings speak to a fundamental shift in how people relate to technology (Hermann and Puntoni, 2024), suggesting that the convergence of AI and human motivation holds transformative potential for reimagining what it means to belong, achieve, and connect in an increasingly digital world (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

2.1. Self-Determination Theory

This article adopts Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the primary theoretical lens to explore motivational responses in AI-enabled brand interactions. SDT posits that individuals are optimally motivated when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Over time, SDT has become a comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation across various contexts, including digital environments (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Yeh at al., 2025). Unlike theories focused on the quantity of motivation, SDT emphasizes its quality, distinguishing between autonomous motivation, driven by internal values, and controlled motivation—driven by external rewards or pressures (Bergdahl et al., 2023).

Autonomy reflects the desire to self-regulate behavior in accordance with one's values and identity (Ryan and Deci, 2017). In digital contexts, it involves user preferences for choice, control, and personalization (Sims et al., 2024). Competence refers to the feeling of effectiveness and opportunities to develop one's abilities (Janssen and Schadenberg, 2024). On streaming platforms, this may involve mastering content discovery, achieve goals, and receive feedback (Suryavanshi et al., 2022). Relatedness involves feeling connected, cared for, and a sense of belonging (Ryan and Deci, 2017), which streaming services can foster through shared viewing, social features, and community-oriented interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2024).

Applied to AI-driven automation in customer relationships, SDT helps explain how AI design features, such as personalization, gamification, anthropomorphism, and homophily, can influence engagement, trust, and satisfaction by supporting or undermining these psychological needs (Bergdahl et al., 2023). Research shows that satisfying these needs in digital settings improves user attitudes toward AI (Bergdahl et al., 2023). When AI systems enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness, users tend to respond with greater engagement and more positive perceptions (Sims et al., 2024).

Using SDT to analyze streaming platforms offers a valuable perspective on how these services can evolve from passive content providers into interactive, community-building ecosystems. As McLean et al. (2021) highlight, AI tools that meet users' psychological needs enhance consumer-brand engagement, strengthening loyalty and long-term relationships. Reframing AI's role through SDT reveals how thoughtful design can turn automation into a source of motivational engagement, rather than a substitute for human connection (Silayach et al., 2025).

2.2. AI Service Perceptions: Enabling Positive Automation of Brand Relationships

The integration of AI in brand communication has reshaped consumer-brand interactions, fostering a positive form of relationship automation that enhances connection quality. Xia and Shannon (2025) highlight that AI chatbot features significantly improve customer perceptions, where ease of use and perceived usefulness foster positive attitudes and strengthen brand relationships. Chatbots also boost engagement and entertainment, while personalized interactions deepen customer-brand bonds.

AI equipped with social and trust-enhancing attributes transforms interactions into personalized, relational experiences that promote engagement and long-lasting relationships (Cheng and Jiang, 2021). Human-like AI features, such as verbal embodiment and social cues, enhance trust and positive brand attitudes (McLean et al., 2021). Design elements emphasizing uniqueness and recognition can increase consumer willingness to pay and differentiate brands (Kristensen et al., 2012). AI service perceptions, consumers' cognitive and affective evaluations of AI-powered brand interfaces, form the basis of this beneficial automation, enabling more efficient yet meaningful brand relationships (El Abed and Castro-Lopez, 2023). Hollebeek et al. (2024) argue that AI interactions, when perceived as competent and trustworthy, strengthen engagement and create seamless brand experiences. Consumers often attribute human traits such as empathy to conversational AI, facilitating symbolic bonds especially when agents are seen as responsive (Bergner et al., 2023).

Perceived social presence, the sense of interacting with another social being, is crucial for AI acceptance in brand contexts (Kim et al., 2023). Conversational features like turn-taking enhance perceived humanness, deepening consumer-brand relationships (Bergner et al., 2023). This presence builds trust, satisfaction, and intention to maintain the relationship (Salih et al., 2025). Moreover, virtual assistants' bidirectional communication simulates human relationship dynamics, reinforcing relational commitment (Alimamy and Kuhail, 2023). The symbolic value of automation is also key. Efficient, coherent, and personalized AI interactions reinforce perceptions of professionalism and brand care (Eugenio et al., 2024). Emotional and cognitive engagement catalyzes loyalty, making automation facilitative rather than dehumanizing (Marrone and Testa, 2022).

However, balancing automation with authenticity is vital. Transparency and alignment with consumer expectations are necessary to avoid perceptions of manipulation or loss of human agency, which can erode trust. Designing AI systems that convey care, adaptability, and consistency with brand values remains a central challenge (Van De Poel, 2020). Overall, AI service perceptions enable a positive form of relationship automation benefiting both consumers and brands (Guerreiro and Loureiro, 2023). Marketers who optimize these perceptions can create automated brand relationships that feel bidirectional, meaningful, and valuable, transforming automation from a potential barrier into a powerful connection enabler (Zhang et al., 2023).

2.3. Personalisation and Automation of Brand Relationship

Personalisation in streaming services adapts content and recommendations to individual users by applying AI algorithms that analyse viewing data and past interactions (Enholm et al., 2021). Extensively studied in online customer experience, personalization has been shown to boost satisfaction, platform engagement, and retention (Yoon and Kim, 2023). Specifically, in streaming, it tailors' content to preferences, enhancing satisfaction and loyalty while reducing decision fatigue amid vast options (Obiegbu and Larsen, 2024).

From the perspective of SDT, personalization supports autonomy by offering choices aligned with users' interests (Bergdahl et al., 2023). Platforms like Netflix, through personalized recommendations, increase users' control over their viewing, promoting self-determined decision-making (Sims et al., 2024). Beyond algorithms, personalization extends to relational and emotional dimensions—referred to as

intimacy—which fosters positive connections and mediates favourable consumer attitudes toward recommendations (Liang et al., 2009). On streaming platforms, intimacy, combined with homophily, enhances users' sense of closeness and identification. Silayach et al. (2025) found that personalization influences satisfaction by creating a feeling of being individually understood ("Functional Capability Perception").

However, AI-enabled personalization's impact on brand relationships and autonomy can be mixed. While it fosters loyalty by making users feel understood (Obiegbu and Larsen, 2024), it may also create tension by threatening autonomy, potentially diminishing satisfaction (Gonçalves et al., 2024). This depends on context; users feel autonomy loss particularly when privacy or identity feels compromised. Yet, AI interfaces employing human-like dialogue can enhance perceived humanness, deepening intimate consumer-brand bonds (Bergner et al., 2023). The success of personalization hinges on accurate understanding of preferences; poor personalization risks brand switching or consumer backlash (Obiegbu and Larsen, 2024). To optimize user experience and brand loyalty, streaming services should balance personalization with user autonomy, offer content variety, and reinforce user agency (Gonçalves et al., 2024).

Building on SDT and empirical evidence, we hypothesize:

H1: AI-enabled personalization positively influences automation of brand relationships in streaming platforms

2.4. Gamification and Automation of Brand Relationships

Gamification applies game design elements to non-game contexts to boost user engagement and motivation (Deterding et al., 2011; Harwood and Garry, 2015). In streaming, it promotes involvement and immersion through challenges, rewards, and interactive choices—evident in Netflix's 'Bandersnatch'—making viewing more dynamic and personalized (Suryavanshi et al., 2022). Gamification taps into desires for achievement, recognition, and rewards (Gupta and Gomathi, 2017). Marketing-wise, gamification drives brand engagement via mechanics, aesthetics, self-benefits, and achievements (Hewapathirana and Caldera, 2023). SDT frames gamification as addressing competence by offering challenges and recognition (Xi and Hamari, 2019). When gamified experiences are voluntary, they also support autonomy by allowing personally meaningful engagement (Deterding et al., 2011).

AI-powered gamification enhances brand attachment through intrinsic need satisfaction—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—with relatedness mediating brand attachment most strongly (Shania and Iskandar, 2021). Competence-driven gamification fosters stronger brand bonds, mediated by anticipated emotions (Proksch et al., 2015). The integration of AI personalizes interactions and crafts compelling brand narratives, turning automated interactions into feelings of empowerment and recognition (Deryl et al., 2023).

Therefore:

H2: AI-enabled gamification positively influences automation of brand relationships in streaming platforms

2.5. Anthropomorphism and Automation of Brand Relationships

Anthropomorphism is attributing human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities, including AI (Epley et al., 2007; Alabed et al., 2024; So et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). It improves user attitudes by reducing psychological distance and facilitating trust, empathy, and social presence in automated brand interactions (Chaturvedi et al., 2025; Munnukka et al., 2022). This tendency arises from accessible human-centered knowledge, motivation to understand agents, and desire for social connection (Epley et al., 2007). Those with greater needs for social connection, such as loneliness or attachment anxiety,

anthropomorphize more (Epley et al., 2008). These aspects link to SDT's relatedness need (Ryan and Deci, 2020). Desire to predict behavior (effectance motivation) also increases anthropomorphism, especially toward unpredictable agents (Epley et al., 2008).

Recent research shows racial homophily moderates anthropomorphism's effect on trust in virtual influencers, suggesting anthropomorphism interacts with similarity cues like homophily (Wan et al., 2024). Human-like AI characteristics create illusions of social presence, signaling relational capacity, thus satisfying relatedness needs and strengthening user-brand bonds in automated settings (Christoforakos and Diefenbach, 2022).

Accordingly:

H3: AI-enabled anthropomorphism positively influences automation of brand relationships in streaming platforms

2.6. Homophily and Automation of Brand Relationships

Homophily is the tendency to bond with others who share similar attributes—values, interests, or identity (McPherson et al., 2001). Unlike anthropomorphism's human-like traits, homophily builds connection through perceived similarity between users and AI or among users on the platform (Usman et al., 2015). In streaming, this manifests as perceived similarity shaping content recommendations and social proximity (Oquiñena et al., 2024). While services like Spotify broaden users' options, they also individualize consumption, which may increase value but risks homogenizing behavior through feedback loops (Chaney et al., 2018). To counter this, recommendation systems incorporate user congruity—similarity degrees among friends and users—to enhance both recommendations and social belonging (Filieri et al., 2023).

Homophily boosts satisfaction and engagement with brands, even in automated environments lacking direct social interaction (Ibrar et al., 2025). In online gaming and brand communities, greater similarity among users fosters participation, social interaction, and purchase behavior (Wu et al., 2014). Its effects vary by platform type and user preferences, stronger in closed, symmetric, or single-platform networks (Kwon et al., 2017). AI leverages these social principles to automate and strengthen brand relationships by enhancing relatedness and engagement (Marrone and Testa, 2022). Social media chatbots and AI agents foster consumer engagement by providing information, social interaction, and entertainment, encouraging anthropomorphism and relationship marketing (Zhang et al., 2023). These AI-driven methods improve trust, satisfaction, and commitment, addressing relatedness needs in digital contexts where face-to-face interaction is absent (Ameen et al., 2020).

Thus:

H4: AI-enabled homophily positively influences automation of brand relationships in streaming platforms

2.7. Automation of Brand Relationships and Online Brand Community

The automation of brand relationships involves leveraging technology, especially AI, to create, maintain, and deepen connections between brands and consumers through personalized recommendations, interactive features, human-like communication, and community-building elements (Hollebeek et al., 2024). Online brand communities, characterized by shared consciousness, rituals, and a sense of moral responsibility, consist of consumers united by their interest in a brand and interact via digital platforms (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). From a SDT standpoint, moving from automated brand relationships to online brand communities marks a shift from satisfying individual psychological needs to fostering collective experiences. Platforms that effectively meet users' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness create conditions for users to identify with the brand and connect with others sharing that identity (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Bergdahl et al., 2023).

Online brand communities and social media platforms are critical for nurturing consumer-brand relationships, promoting engagement that often leads to brand love and positive word-of-mouth (Paruthi et al., 2022). Engagement in these communities is driven by brand relationship quality and consumer identification with the community, with trust playing a mediating role between these relationships and brand loyalty (Jain et al., 2017). The effectiveness of interactive brand applications depends on consumers' internet experience; personalized websites work best for experienced users, while customer communities better engage novices (Thorbjørnsen et al., 2002). Offline events and online tools like bulletin boards and expert chats further strengthen communities by enabling shared experiences and multi-way interactions, fostering consumer-brand identification with positive brand outcomes (Stokburger‐Sauer, 2010).

McLean et al. (2021) suggest that AI-driven consumer engagement boosts brand usage intention, laying groundwork for community formation. Hollebeek et al. (2024) identify "human-AI collaboration outcomes" as key results of AI-based engagement. Streaming platforms like Netflix exemplify this with social sharing, discussion forums, ratings, and interactive content that create shared cultural moments around specific shows or genres (Suryavanshi et al., 2022; Hermann and Puntoni, 2024). Automation technologies, such as personalized content delivery, sentiment analysis, and AI-driven engagement scoring, enable brands to track and respond to community members' emotional and behavioral cues in real time, fostering targeted interactions that deepen emotional bonds and sustain participation (Park and Ha, 2021). Recent studies affirm that AI-mediated interactions satisfying psychological needs foster belonging and community identification (Janssen and Schadenberg, 2024). Lee and Kim (2025) show how AI systems can transform individual user-brand interactions into collective experiences, while Nguyen et al. (2021) link AI-enhanced user experience to stronger brand attachment and community identification. This leads us to hypothesize:

H5: The automation of brand relationships positively influences the development of online brand communities on streaming platforms.

2.8. The Mediating Role of Automation of Brand Relationships

Building on SDT, this study proposes that automation of brand relationships mediates the effects of AI-enabled personalization, gamification, anthropomorphism, and homophily on user engagement with brand communities in streaming platforms. SDT posits that motivation hinges on satisfying autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Within streaming platforms, these needs are fulfilled through tailored interactions, engaging gameplay, human-like interfaces, and perceived similarity with others or brands, all fostering deeper psychological engagement (McLean et al., 2021).

AI-enabled personalization meets the need for autonomy by aligning content and recommendations with users' preferences, enhancing their control and volition (Sims et al., 2024). Gamification addresses competence through challenges, rewards, and feedback that foster achievement (Hewapathirana and Caldera, 2023). Anthropomorphism grants digital agents human-like qualities, and homophily highlights perceived similarity between users and brands or communities; both satisfy the need for relatedness by fostering emotional bonds and social connection (Ibrar et al., 2025).

Automation integrates these motivational drivers, facilitating the development of habitual, emotionally rich brand relationships (Hollebeek et al., 2024). By fulfilling autonomy, competence, and relatedness through automated interactions, users internalize brand engagement, seamlessly integrating it into daily digital routines and enhancing intrinsic motivation to participate in brand communities (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Bergdahl et al., 2023). Thus, the influences of personalization, gamification, anthropomorphism, and homophily on community engagement are not solely direct but operate through the automation of brand relationships (Alimamy and Kuhail, 2023). This mediating process explains how technological features translate into deeper, self-determined involvement with streaming platform brand communities.

Therefore, we propose:

H6: Automation of brand relationships mediates the effects of AI-enabled personalization, gamification, anthropomorphism, and homophily on Online Brand Community within streaming platforms.

Accordingly, this study addresses a central research question: How do AI-enabled mechanisms (personalization, gamification, anthropomorphism, and homophily) contribute to the automation of brand relationships and, in turn, foster participation in online brand communities within streaming platforms? Grounded in Self-Determination Theory, this question seeks to uncover the psychological processes through which AI transforms passive content consumption into active, socially meaningful engagement. To establish the conceptual foundation of this research, we propose a model (Figure 1) that illustrates the relationships among these AI-enabled mechanisms, the automation of brand relationships, and online brand communities. The model is anchored in SDT, with each mechanism targeting one or more of the fundamental psychological needs outlined by the theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Bergdahl et al., 2023).

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Figure 1

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2. Materials and Methods

For this study, an online questionnaire was developed and distributed via social media platforms — WhatsApp, Facebook, LinkedIn — and email. The participants were Portuguese consumers or subscribers of various TV streaming platforms, all aged 18 or older. To ensure the validity of the study, respondents were asked to explicitly confirm whether they perceived the presence of AI and automation in their interactions with the streaming platform. This step was essential to guarantee that participants recognised automated features, such as personalised recommendations, AI-driven gamification elements or anthropomorphic agents, as part of their user experience. This approach ensures that the responses reflect genuine perceptions of AI-enabled interactions, thereby strengthening the reliability of the measured constructs and the alignment between the research model and respondents' lived experience. To optimize data collection, the questionnaire was split into two separate surveys using Google Forms, in two waves. The first survey, containing 22 items, measured four variables: Personalization, Gamification, Anthropomorphism, and Homophily. The second survey, with 17 items, assessed two variables: Automation of brand relationships and Online Brand Community. Separating the questionnaires and administering them at different times allowed a clear distinction between independent and dependent variables, reducing response bias and controlling order effects. This approach minimized the influence of question sequence on participants' answers and avoided perceived causal connections between variables. Additionally, distributing the surveys in separate rounds improved response quality by shortening each questionnaire, thereby reducing respondent fatigue and facilitating completion. Measuring antecedents and outcomes at different points also helped mitigate common method bias. A pre-test was conducted with twenty participants who completed both surveys to evaluate question clarity and overall response time. Feedback from this pilot led to refinements in the questionnaires. The sample consisted of 315 Portuguese participants, with a balanced gender distribution (52.1% female, 47.3% male). Most respondents were aged between 36 and 55 years (56.8%) and held higher education degrees (77.6% with at least a bachelor's). The majority were employed (72.4%), and streaming usage was frequent, with 72.7% accessing platforms at least once a week. Session durations were typically moderate, with 52.1% using platforms for 1–2 hours per access. Overall, the sample reflects a digitally active, educated, and professionally engaged population.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using AMOS 29 to examine the psychometric properties of the measurement scales and to evaluate the overall fit of the proposed measurement model (see Table I). The model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data, as indicated by the following fit indices: IFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.97, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05, and $\chi^2/df = 1.65$. Table II reports the descriptive statistics, intercorrelations, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability values for each of the constructs examined. The AVE values for all constructs surpassed the

0.50 benchmark proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), confirming satisfactory convergent validity. Discriminant validity was further established, as the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs. In addition, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) was calculated in accordance with Henseler et al. (2015). All HTMT values remained below the recommended threshold of 0.85, reinforcing the evidence for discriminant validity among the seven constructs under investigation.

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Table I

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Table II

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3. Results

Table III display the outcomes of the structural model estimation. The model exhibits a satisfactory fit to the data, as evidenced by the following fit indices: IFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.96, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.05, and $\chi^2/df = 1.74$. These values fall within the commonly accepted thresholds, indicating that the structural model is well-specified and adequately represents the observed data.

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Table III

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Table III summarises the results of the hypothesis testing derived from the structural model. The analysis shows that personalisation ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), gamification ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$) and anthropomorphism ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) each have a positive and statistically significant effect on the automation of brand relationships. This supports hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 respectively. However, the effect of homophily on the automation of brand relationships was not significant ($r = 0.01$, n.s.), leading to the rejection of H4. Furthermore, the automation of brand relationships was found to have a significant positive influence on online brand communities ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H5. These findings emphasise the distinct roles of personalisation, gamification and anthropomorphism in shaping perceptions of the automation of brand relationships, which in turn influence community-related outcomes.

A bootstrap procedure was applied to assess indirect effects and mediation (Table IV), utilizing non-parametric resampling methods in line with the approach proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2004, 2008).

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Table IV

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4. Discussion

This study explored how AI-enabled personalization, gamification, anthropomorphism, and homophily influence the automation of brand relationships on streaming platforms by fulfilling users' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as framed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Findings indicate that personalization (r = 0.34***), gamification (r = 0.15***), and anthropomorphism (r = 0.29***) significantly enhance brand relationship automation. Personalization fosters autonomy by aligning content with user preferences, reinforcing emotional bonds and user agency (Bergdahl et al., 2023; Yoon & Kim, 2023). Gamification supports competence through interactive features that promote mastery and engagement (Xi & Hamari, 2019; Janssen and Schadenberg, 2024). Anthropomorphism enhances relatedness by simulating human-like interactions, reducing psychological distance and deepening emotional connection (Munnukka et al., 2022; Chaturvedi et al., 2025). Conversely, homophily (r = 0.010) did not significantly impact relationship automation, suggesting that perceived similarity may be less salient in individualized streaming environments. Prior personalization may already satisfy users' desire for relevance, rendering homophily redundant (Chaney et al., 2017). Additionally, the platform's structural emphasis on personal consumption over social interaction may shift relational cues from homophily to anthropomorphism (Zhang et al., 2023). These findings underscore the nuanced role of AI features in shaping automated brand relationships. The findings strongly support H5, revealing that the automation of brand relationships significantly fosters online brand community development on streaming platforms (r = 0.48***). AI-enabled personalization, gamification, and anthropomorphism extend beyond individual engagement to enable collective brand-centered interactions by satisfying autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Automated tools such as recommendation engines and sentiment analysis enhance emotional resonance and trust, reinforcing community belonging (Jain et al., 2018). These results advance prior research by showing that automation transforms individual interactions into shared cultural experiences (McLean et al., 2021). Regarding H6, automation mediates the effects of personalization, gamification, and anthropomorphism on community engagement, but not homophily. While the former drivers rely on automation to integrate psychological needs into engagement routines, homophily exerts a direct influence, acting as an immediate social cue. This distinction refines SDT by showing that automation is a central conduit for most motivational drivers, but not all.

5. Contributions, Limitations and Suggestions for future research

This study advances theoretical understanding by applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to AI-enabled streaming platforms, demonstrating how personalization, gamification, anthropomorphism, and homophily satisfy users' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). It shows that these AI mechanisms foster intrinsic motivation, essential for meaningful consumer-brand relationships (McLean et al., 2021). Furthermore, it positions the automation of brand relationships as a mediating mechanism that internalizes AI-driven interactions, transforming them into emotionally rich and habitual engagements (Hollebeek et al., 2024). The study also contributes to brand community literature by integrating AI features with SDT, explaining how personalized and anthropomorphic interactions enhance identification and collective experiences. Finally, by focusing on streaming platforms like Netflix, it addresses a gap in consumer-brand research, offering sector-specific insights into AI's role in digital brand management. For practitioners, the findings suggest that AI systems should be designed to fulfill psychological needs through personalization, gamification, and anthropomorphism, fostering deeper engagement and loyalty. Automation should be leveraged to create

seamless, emotionally resonant brand interactions. Additionally, platforms should promote community-building features—such as forums and shared content—to strengthen collective identification. Engagement strategies must also be tailored to user experience levels, recognizing that novice users may benefit more from socially driven features than advanced personalization. Limitations include reliance on self-reported data and a cross-sectional design, which constrain causal inference. The Netflix-specific context may limit generalizability, and SDT constructs may require adaptation for AI-mediated environments. Future research should explore longitudinal and cross-cultural designs, investigate emerging AI types, and adopt innovative methods like digital ethnography. Ethical concerns and individual differences (e.g., personality, tech-readiness) should also be examined to develop a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of AI's role in consumer-brand relationships.

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Figure 1- Conceptual model

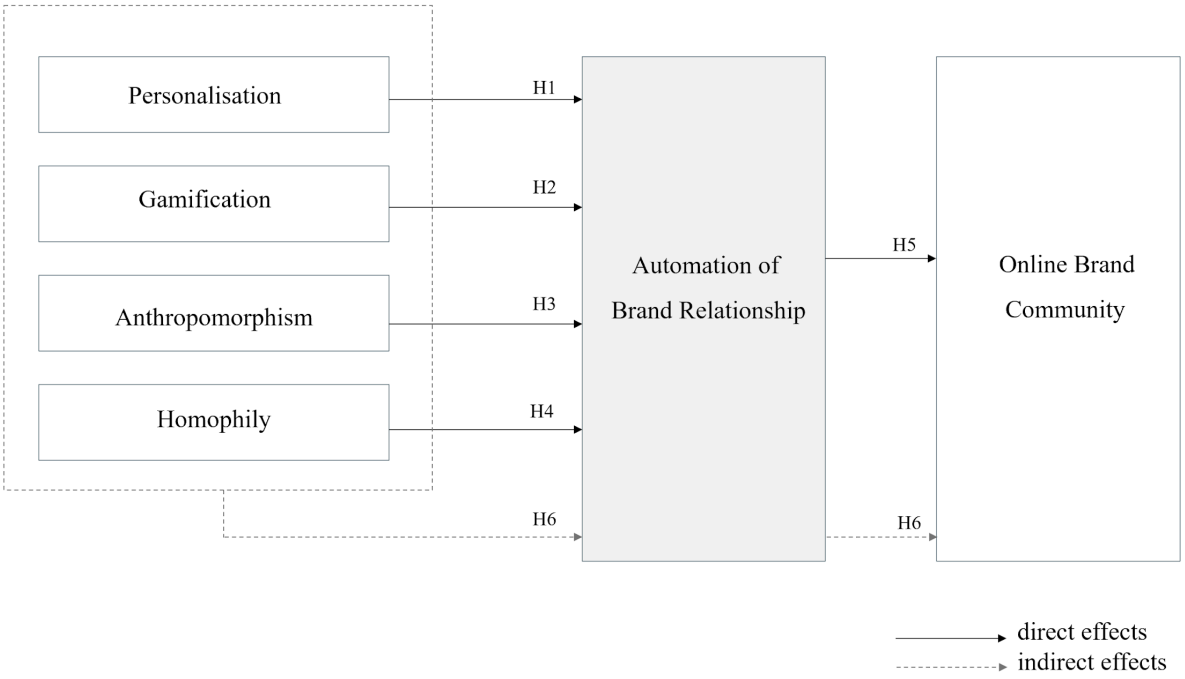

Table I - Confirmatory Factor Analysis

	SRW	C.R.
Personalisation- Akdim and Casaló (2023)		
I feel my streaming platform understands my needs when making recommendations.	0.93	19.59
I feel my streaming platform knows what I want when making recommendations.	0.91	18.77
I feel my streaming platform takes my needs as its own preferences when making recommendations.	0.79	
I feel my streaming platform matches with my interests when making recommendations.	0.95	20.07
Gamification- Rodrigues et al. (2017)		
Learning about movies and cinema during a game on my streaming platform would be nicer.	0.82	12.50
I feel pleasure in the use of my streaming platform with game elements and mechanics.	0.95	13.85
I feel good while playing a game on my streaming platform	0.96	13.93
I would like to participate in games in my streaming platform	0.91	13.41
I think my streaming platform with content and animated elements is secure.	0.76	11.72
My streaming platform should reward their customers through a system by points.	0.64	
Anthropomorphism- Patrizi et al. (2024)		
My streaming platform appears to have a mind of its own.	0.79	15.50
My streaming platform appears to have intentions.	0.81	15.93
My streaming platform appears to have free will.	0.87	17.81
My streaming platform appears to have consciousness.	0.91	18.67
My streaming platform appears to have desires.	0.94	19.62
My streaming platform appears to have beliefs.	0.87	21.79
My streaming platform appears to have the ability to experience emotions.	0.79	
Homophily- Filieri et al. (2023)		
My streaming platform thinks like me.	0.73	16.01
My streaming platform is similar to me.	0.93	26.05
My streaming platform is like me.	0.91	24.71
My streaming platform has a lot in common with me.	0.93	25.78
My streaming platform behaves like me.	0.88	
Automation of brand relationships- Lin and Wu (2023)		
My streaming platform's responses reflected the continuity of our earlier interaction.	0.80	
I felt that my streaming platform carefully registered my responses and provided feedback based on the information I entered.	0.87	18.63
I felt as if my streaming platform offered a personalized response to my actions.	0.89	19.02
My interaction with my streaming platform felt like part of a continuous thread or loop.	0.90	19.36
I felt that the information provided by my streaming platform was well connected to my actions.	0.93	20.51
The messages I received from my streaming platform were clearly based on my previous inputs.	0.88	18.70
Online Brand community – identification- Zhou et al. (2012)		
When I talk about my streaming platform, I usually say "we" rather than "they."	0.83	
I see myself as part of my streaming platform.	0.86	26.12
My streaming platform's successes feel like my own successes.	0.88	20.29
When someone praises my streaming platform, it feels like a personal compliment.	0.94	23.02
When someone criticizes my streaming platform, it feels like a personal insult.	0.95	23.29

I am very interested in what others think about my streaming platform.	0.92	21.88
Online Brand community – commitment- Zhou et al. (2012)		
I would feel a sense of loss if my streaming platform were no longer available.	0.87	
I really care about the future of my streaming platform.	0.91	32.34
I feel a strong sense of loyalty to my streaming platform.	0.93	24.67
The relationship I have with my streaming platform is one I intend to maintain indefinitely.	0.94	25.38
The relationship I have with my streaming platform is important to me.	0.96	26.70

Notes: SRW- Standardized regression weights; CR- critical ratio

Table II- Correlations, Cronbach's α, composite reliabilities and average variances extracted

	SD	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	AVE	CR
X1- Personalisation	0.95	**0.94**	0.44	0.22	0.25	0.50	0.24	0.80	0.91
X2- Gamification	1.06	0.39	**0.92**	0.36	0.46	0.48	0.43	0.72	0.90
X3- Anthropomorphism	1.39	0.18	0.33	**0.93**	0.41	0.30	0.47	0.73	0.92
X4- Homophily	1.45	0.22	0.42	0.39	**0.91**	0.26	0.33	0.78	0.90
X5- Automation of BR	1.32	0.48	0.47	0.30	0.25	**0.93**	0.45	0.77	0.91
X6- Online Brand community	1.52	0.20	0.43	0.49	0.35	0.46	**0.92**	0.80	0.89

Notes: SD: Standard Deviation; AVE: Average Variance Extracted; CR: Composite Reliability. Diagonal entries are Cronbach's α coefficients; HTMT values - above the main diagonal; Correlations values – bellow the main diagonal.

Table III- Results of the structural model.

				SRW	P
H1	Personalisation	→	Automation of BR	0.34	***
H2	Gamification	→	Automation of BR	0.15	***
H3	Anthropomorphism	→	Automation of BR	0.28	***
H4	Homophily	→	Automation of BR	0.01	n.s.
H5	Automation of brand relationships	→	Online Brand community	0.48	***

Notes: (1) "***": $p < 0.01$; "n.s.- not significant": $p > 0.1$; (2) "SRW": Standardized regression weights

Table IV- Indirect effects

elationship	SIE	95% bootstrap confidence interval	p-value
PER → ABR → BC	0.25	[0.18; 0.35]	***
GAM→ ABR → BC	0.19	[0.11; 0.29]	***
ANT→ ABR → BC	0.08	[0.03; 0.14]	**
HOMO→ ABR→ BC	0.01	[-0.04; 0.09]	n.s.

Notes: (1) PER- Personalisation; GAM- Gamification; ANT- Anthropomorphism; HOMO- Homophily; ABR- automation of brand relationships; OBC- Brand community; (2) "***": $p < 0.01$; "**":0,05 $< p <$ 0.01; "n.s.- not significant": $p > 0.1$.