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Building consumer-brand relationships for the customer experience management

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the customer experience in the consumer-brand relationships. Customer experience is considered as the set of all moments of interaction between an organization and a customer, in which physical, functional and emotional factors stimulate the senses of customers. Examining the consumer-brand relationships of young consumers about four selected product categories-brands, in this work we study empirically these interactions - through qualitative methodologies - at two levels: a. at product category level, analyzing the customer experience' s factors (firm's experiential platform) that sustain the value co-creation process between firm and customer; b. at brand level, analyzing some key determinants of consumer-brand relationships, such as the free associations, the brand metaphors, and the brand experience. The paper is organized in three main parts: in the first, there is a literature review on the role of customer experience management in the marketing strategies and on the concept of consumer-brand relationships, focalizing the attention on its determinants; in the second are proposed the findings of the empirical research on the customer experience in consumer-brand relationships about the four selected product categories-brands; in the third, we discuss the findings in terms of managerial implications, limits and future research opportunities.

Keywords

Customer experience, consumer-brand relationship, brand experience, brand management.

1. Introduction

In the last years, several studies have focused on customer experience management (Schmitt, 1999, 2003, 2008; Smith, Wheeler, 2003; Meyer, Schwager, 2007) as marketing strategy to provide superior value for the customers and co-create new value with them (Bendapudi, Leone, 2003; Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo, Lush, 2004; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, Knox, 2009). Schmitt (2003) defines customer experience management (CEM) as “the process of managing a customer's entire experience with a brand or a company”. Therefore, a firm principally has to: 1. build an experiential platform, based on a series of touch point – “customer corridor”, in accordance with Meyer, Schwager (2007: p.119) - providing a superior value for the customers; 2. manage the consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Aggarwal, 2004; Aaker, Fournier, Brasel, 2004), designing brand experience (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, Knox, 2009) and analyzing steadily the main

customer perceptions. In this perspective, we consider brand experience as one of the most important determinants of consumer-brand relationships. Brakus, Schmitt, Zarantonello, (2009) define brand experience as “sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of brand design and identity, packaging, communications and environments”.

This paper puts in evidence the findings of an ongoing research on the determinants of consumer-brand relationships for managing customer experience. The empirical research, aimed to verify the theoretical assumptions underlying this article, involves four product categories-brands: two of these recognized as experiential product categories-brands (chocolate creams-*Nutella* and home consoles-*Playstation*); the others two as not experiential (casual shoes-*Geox* and oral and dental care products-*Colgate*). The choice of these product categories-brands has been carried out on the base of the findings of the previous research phase during which was identified a group of thirteen product categories-brands recognized as experiential (nine product categories-brands) and not experiential (four product categories-brands). For these product categories-brands was arranged a quantitative research aimed to measure, by structural equations models, the relationships among brand knowledge, brand experience, word of mouth and brand preference. The findings of this first stage of research were recently published (Cantone, Risitano, 2010).

The aim of this paper, instead, is to analyze the customers’ experiential responses in the consumer-brand relationships, studying empirically these interactions through a qualitative methodology at two levels: 1. at product category level, analyzing the customer experience’s factors (firm’s experiential platform) that sustain the value co-creation process between firm and customer; 2. at brand level, analyzing some key determinants of consumer-brand relationships, such as the *free associations* (proxy of not-stimulated brand image), the *brand metaphors* (cited by interviewers) and the *brand experience* (evaluating the presence of the four dimensions of Brakus, Zarantonello, Schmitt’s theoretical framework, 2009).

The paper is organized in three paragraphs: in the first, there is a literature review on the role of customer experience management in the marketing strategies and on the concept of consumer-brand relationships, in particular on its determinants; in the second, we discuss the findings of the empirical research on the customer experience in consumer-brand relationships about the four aforesaid selected product categories-brands; in the third, we put in evidence the managerial implications of the findings, the limits and future research opportunities.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Customer experience management

Holbrook and Hirschman's are the pioneers academics that have studied – in terms of hedonic consumption (1982) - the experiential nature of consumer behavior. The Authors, in fact, highlighted the role of emotions, feelings and fun as key drivers of consumer behavior processes in the field of hedonistic products. Analyzing the characteristics of experience economy, after many years Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) emphasized the concept of customer experience during the stages of purchase and use of products. They suggested to embed goods and services in an experiential brand, in a co-evolution process with the customers as key-player. Customer experience could be considered as “the set of all moments of interaction between an organization and a customer, in which physical, functional and emotional factors stimulate the senses of customers” (Shaw and Ivens, 2005). According to Carù and Covà (2003), this concept has to be extended beyond the consumer-firm context, recognizing the importance of consumption-related experience that takes place with family, friends and the wider community.

Schmitt (1999, 2003) examines how the companies build experiential marketing strategies in the customer relationship management. He recognizes the customer experience management (CEM) “as the process of managing a customer's entire experience with a product, a brand or a company”. Many Authors analyze the creating distinctive of customer experience as a process of value co-creation with the customers (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2000, 2003, 2004; Bendapudi, Leone, 2003; Vargo, Lusch, 2004, 2008; Cantone, Risitano, 2007; Frow, Payne, 2007; Tynan, McKechnie, Chhuon, 2009): these studies argue that the firm does not create and deliver value to the passive customer, but rather, through interactions, embeds value in the co-creation process between the firm and its customers (Tynan, McKechnie, Chhuon, 2009)¹.

It's important emphasize that customer experience management (CEM) differs from customer relationship management (CRM), because it focuses on the experience in place of the customers, rather than the history of customer's purchasing patterns. In fact, CRM strategies are principally related to manage the value creation process between firm and customer, through deep analysis of data with technology software (analytical CRM). The acquisition of customer knowledge and the diffusion of this knowledge in the firm's

¹ As highlighted by Tynan, McKechnie and Chhuon (2009), this approach “moves the focus of marketing to a process of co-creating value through the exchange of knowledge and skills with customers and partners (Vargo

organization allow “the development of appropriate relationships with specific customers, integrating the marketing processes across the many areas of the firm and across the network of firms that collaborate to generate customer value” (Boulding et al., 2005)². Instead, CEM strategies allow to co-create value both for the customer and for the firm (Verhoef et al., 2009). The customer experience occurs when customer and brand (or company) come into interaction, developing the value contacts that provoke some responses. In the last years, many firms are adopting CEM strategies, in which are emphasized the role of emotions, feelings, sentiments, passions and experiences in the consumer-brand relationships. Schmitt (2003) interprets the CEM process as a new customer-centric marketing strategy, based on five steps: a. the analysis of the customer’s experiential world; b. the creation of an experiential platform; c. the design of the brand experience; d. the structuring of the customer’s interface; e. the customer’s engagement in continuous business innovation. Designing, implementing and managing a CEM program allows to maximize two key objectives for the firms: 1. to create value for the customers, defining a unique and memorable experience respect to the competitors; 2. to provide revenue, profits and cash flow for the company. The aspiration of any marketing manager that implement a CEM strategy is to enhance consumer-brand relationships, building the customer loyalty (Frow, Payne, 2007) and a long term profitability (Lywood, Stone, Ekinici, 2009).

The CEM strategies impel the customer’s involvement at different levels (Gentile, Spiller, Noci, 2007): rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, spiritual. There are two kinds of customer-firm contacts (Meyer, Schwager, 2007): direct and indirect. Direct contacts generally happen during the phases of purchase and use; they are, generally, initiated by the customer. Instead, indirect contacts, most often, involve unplanned encounters with representatives of a company’s products, services or brands; they take the form of (positive or negative) word-of-mouth, advertising, news reports, etc. In the last years, many studies are focused on the customer experience in the retail perspective (Getwal, Levy, Kumar, 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009; Piccinelli et al. 2009), highlighting the main characteristics of CEM programs finalize to create a “win-to-win value exchange between the retailer and its customers” (Getwal, Levy, Kumer, 2009). Verhoef et al. (2009, p.32) describe the retail customer experience as “a holistic process that involve customer’ cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to the retailer. This experience is created not only

and Lush, 2004) to co-construct unique experiences (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2004), that is developing a service orientation predicated on processes on joint value creation (Vargo and Lush, 2004, 2008)”.

² Coherently, Payne and Frow (2005) identify five key CRM processes as following: a. strategy development; b. value creation; c. multi-channel integration; d. information management; e. performance assessment.

by those factors that retailer can control (e.g. service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment, price), but also by factors outside of the retailer’s control (e.g. influence of others, purpose of shopping)”.

2.2 Building consumer-brand relationships

The consumer-brand relationships are one of the most “crucial drivers of brand’s sustainable competitive advantage” (Srivastava, Fahey, Christensen, 2001; Nyffenegger, Malär, Krohmer, 2010). In the last years, many academics analyzed the concept of consumer-brand relationships and its determinants to define and manage brand strategies (Fournier, Yao, 1997; Fournier, 1994, 1998; Aggarwal, 2004; Aaker, Fournier, Brasel, 2004; Hayers, Alford, Silver, York, 2006; Nyffenegger, Malär, Krohmer, 2010). Particularly, Fournier (1994, 1998) studied the quality of these relationships, defining the concept of brand relationship quality (BRQ) as “customer-based indicator of the strength and depth of the person-brand relationship”. As pointed out by the researches of the Author, BRQ is perceived by the consumer and reflected its feelings and behaviors towards a brand (Fournier, 1994, 1998)³. In particular (1998), he has identified some emergent forms of relationships, proposing a set of six evaluating dimensions: “Interdependence”, “Commitment”, “Love and Passion”, “Intimacy”, “Self-Connection” and “Partner Quality”. Aaker, Fournier and Brasel (2004) recognize the role of brand personality as focal concept in the relationship development process⁴. Aggarwal (2004) highlighted the effects of brand relationship norms – exchange or communal – on consumer attitudes and behavior, analyzing the role of social context on the business responses. In the actual competition, to analyze the consumer-brand relationships we have to study in depth not only the firm-to-customer (or customer-to-firm) bilateral interactions, but also the customer-to-customer multilateral interactions which drive the value co-creation processes (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2000, 2003, 2004).

Coherently with the service-dominant logic perspective (Vargo, Lush, 2004, 2008), the customer engage dialogues and interactions with other customers (i.e. brand communities), such as with their suppliers during the product design, delivery and consumption phases. To create value the firm has, priority, to understand and learn how customer co-create activities (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, Knox, 2009). For example, the brand identity could be co-defined

³ In a recent work, Nyffenegger, Malär and Krohmer (2010) argue that “BRQ includes a cognitive and an emotional component; a. the cognitive component results from an evaluative judgment based on cognitive beliefs and evaluations of the brand and its performance; b. instead, the emotional component is reflected in the emotional feelings towards the brand and the personal connection to the brand”.

by firm with customers; the co-creation process is especially understandable in consumer groups such as brand communities or tribes (Covà, Covà, 2002). When the customers search, choice and use products and/or services, they are exposed to various specific brand-related stimuli, such as identity elements, community recommendations, communication tools and other environmental aspects. Building, managing and measuring customer-based brand equity (CBBE: Keller, 1993, 2003, 2007), during all phases of consumer-brand relationships, could be the greatest marketing approach to maximize customer equity (Leone et al., 2006). Therefore, to measure the long term profitability of own customers’ portfolio (Gambarino, Johnson, 1999), any firm needs to manage strategically the set of brand equity sources⁵. Among the basis of CBBE, the most important role to manage consumer-brand relationships is taken on brand knowledge and brand experience.

Brand knowledge is the set of descriptive and evaluative brand information stored in consumer memory (Keller, 2003), based on two main components: brand awareness and brand image. According to Keller (2003), brand awareness is connected to the strength of the brand node in the “associative network memory” (Krishnan, 1996), or trace in memory, as expressed by consumers’ ability to identify the brand under different conditions. Instead, the brand image is the set of the customer’s perceptions about a brand, expressed by the brand associations held in customers’ memory. In others words, these former are the other informational nodes linked to the brand node in the “associative network memory” and evoke the deepest meaning of the brand for the customers (Keller, 2003). To percept a positive brand image is a precondition to create a strong consumer-brand relationship.

To build, manage and control the brand experience allows to maintain a long term consumer-brand relationship, defending the firm by competitors’ actions. In this work - according to Brakus, Schmitt, Zarantonello (2009) - brand experience is considered as “sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of brand design and identity, packaging, communications and environments”. The same Authors (Zarantonello, Schmitt, Brakus, 2007; Brakus, Schmitt, Zarantonello, 2009) validate a brand experience scale based on four dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral. When the customers search, choice and use products and/or

⁴ Brand personality is defined as “ a set of human characteristics associated with a given brand, based on five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness” (Aaker, 1997).

⁵ According to this approach, and coherently with others recent researches, in some precedent work we consider three main kinds of sources for managing and measuring CBBE (Risitano, 2004; Cantone, Risitano, 2007): knowledge-related (i.e. awareness, image, association), experience-related (i.e. attitude, affinity, personality), trust-related (i.e. satisfaction, word-of-mouth, commitment, loyalty).

services, they are exposed to various specific brand-related stimuli, such as identity elements, community recommendations, communication tools and other environmental elements. These are the main learning factors that generate customers’ experiential responses. It’s important to analyze brand experience deepening what are its main antecedents (e.g. brand knowledge) and consequences, such as word-of-mouth, brand commitment and brand loyalty (Schmitt, 2009; Cantone, Risitano, 2010). Creating and managing emotional branding experiences can lead to service the brand differentiation, the customer loyalty and the “evangelical” promotion of the brand (Morrison, Crane, 2007).

3. Empirical research

3.1 Methodology

In accordance with Sawhney (2004), the quantitative market researches are positivist and deductive; they aimed to confirm or reject an hypothesis or a theory or a research question, and are methodologically rigorous and consider the truth as objective and universal. The qualitative researches, instead, are interpretive and reactive, use an inductive comprehension of the phenomena, aimed to generate the determinants of phenomena or insights which drive to some hypothesis to be tested with quantitative market researches techniques, are eclectic, consider the truth subjective and socially built.

For example, the main advantage of the in-depth interviews – one of the qualitative investigation techniques adopted in the empirical research of this paper - is to be explorative of the individual hidden and deep consumer experience and is focused on the objective. The main disadvantage is to be quite intrusive and obtrusive for the customer, and high spending in terms of time and resources. The focus group – the second qualitative technique deployed for the empirical research in this paper – instead, has as main advantage to externalise and socialise the individual consumer experience, and to obtain scale economies in the explorative research process⁶.

As we said in the introductory paragraph, this paper puts in evidence the findings of an ongoing research on the determinants of consumer-brand relationships for managing customer experience. The empirical research aimed to verify the theoretical assumptions underlying this article, involve four product categories-brands, two recognized as experiential categories-brands, the others two as not experiential. The choice of the categories-brands has been

⁶ For a analysis of advantages and disadvantages of qualitative market researches techniques, Cantone L., Testa P. (2010).

carried out on the base of the findings of the previous research phase during which was identified a group of thirteen product categories-brands recognized as experiential (nine product categories-brands) and not experiential (four product categories-brands). For these product categories-brands was arranged a quantitative research aimed to measure, by structural equations models, the relationships among brand knowledge, brand experience, word of mouth and brand preference. The findings of this first stage of research were recently published (Cantone, Risitano, 2010). For developing the second phase of the research project, whose findings are described in this paper, we have selected four product categories-brands from the set of thirteen. As experiential brands we have chosen *Nutella*, category chocolate cream, and *Playstation*, category home console. As not experiential brands the choice has been for *Geox*, category casual shoes, and *Colgate*, category oral and dental care. The aim has been to analyze the customers' experiences in the product categories-brand relationships, namely:

- at product category level, to explicit the key distinctive factors of customer experience (i.e. firm's experiential platform) to create value for them and co-create value with them. The customer experience at product category level has been surveyed, as in accordance to design of research, on several key factors: *satisfied needs, consumption moments, first time usage, changing over time of consumption, sources of influence, consumption habits, store choices*;
- at brand level, analyzing some key determinants of consumer-brand relationships, such as *free associations* (not-stimulated brand image), *brand metaphors* (cited by interviewed) and *brand experience*. The metaphors have been elicited through three questions: 1. “*If the brand were a person what would*”; 2. “*If the brand were an animal what would*”; 3. “*If the brand were a place what would*”. To investigate brand experience, instead, in accordance with Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009), we analyze the presence of four dimensions of brand experience – *sense, feel, think, act* – in the consumer-brand relationships, defined as perceptions generated by brand-related stimuli.

The consumers surveyed, involved in the empirical research, were youth customers living in the City and Province of Naples, in the age group 18-35 years. The respondents have been equally distributed in terms of gender for the categories casual shoes (brand *Geox*), chocolate cream (brand *Nutella*) and dental/oral care (brand *Colgate*); for the category home console (brand *Playstation*), instead, there is an absolute prevalence of male.

Each in-depth interview lasted about 60 minutes, while any focus group about 120 minutes (totally about 64 hours of interviews). The in-depth interviews and focus groups were carried out during the period May-July 2010, at the Marketing Laboratory, Department of

Management, Faculty of Economics, University of Naples Federico II. The consumers interviewed by the in-depth technique were different from focus group ones.

The choice of the range 18-35 years is aimed to analyze the customer experience in the consumer-brand relationships specifically for a target of customers young and young-adult. Also, some of product categories we have surveyed – chocolate cream and home console – highlight an high intensity of consumption generally during the young and young-adult age. In fact, when people became adults could be strongly reduced the consumption and use of aforesaid product categories (caused by the diet or metabolism in the case of chocolate, or by less time for gaming at home, in the case of videogames console). Finally, the empirical research is focused on several key longitudinal dimensions of consumer experience at product category level, among the other: first time usage, changing over time of consumption, the sources of influence for purchasing decisions. To analyze these factors was preferable to focus the survey on young and young-adult consumers, because they have a “fresher mind” to remember the changing of the consumption experience over the time relatively to the surveyed factors.

For developing the survey we have used qualitative research methods, and not quantitative ones. In accordance to this research approach, the aim of the empirical research has been to explore the hypothesis of the consumer responses in an experiential perspective through qualitative techniques (focus group, in-depth interviews). We didn't have, for now, as aim to verify the reliability of these hypothesis, which could be tested in a future phase of this ongoing research, using quantitative research methods. In the following are presented the findings of empirical research.

3.2 Findings

The findings of the empirical research are described first of all at product category level and then at brand, ones (Figures in appendix). As we said above, the analysis of the consumer experience at product category level was performed on several key factors: *satisfied needs, consumption moments, first time usage, changing over time of consumption, sources of influence, consumption habits, store choices*.

The analysis of consumer-brand relationships on the four selected brand (*Nutella, Playstation, Geox and Colgate*) was carried out studying their key determinants, such as the *free associations* (not-stimulated brand image) presented in the interviewer consumer's mind, the *brand metaphors* (cited by interviewed) and *brand experience* (evaluated in term of presence

of the four dimensions of Brakus, Schmitt, Zarantonello’s theoretical framework: sense, feel, think, act) .

3.2.1 Findings at level of experiential product category

Product category: chocolate creams

Satisfied needs

It’s possible recognize two macro-drivers of the category experience, which are core benefits sought by the consumers: *food* and *chocolate*. Relatively to the first concept, the respondents put in evidence that the need or core benefit *food* can be traced by *good relationship*, *difficult relationship* (for diets or health problems), *habit* and *pleasure*. Relatively to *chocolate*, the respondents accept the concept as *pleasure*, *relax*, *need of energy* (in particular for the chocolate bars), *pause*, *need of sweet*, *relaxation*. The need of energy and pause are linked to the *studying* or *working*⁷. *Nutella* is the favourite brand; the dark chocolate, consumed in particular after the coffee break, is alternative to *Nutella* or other brand of *Ferrero* (such as *Kinder*). *Nutella* is the *chocolate cream to spread*, by definition; it’s consumed in *family context* and *makes you feel better*.

Consumption moments

This factor can be traced through three macro-drivers of the consumer experience: *at home (family)*, *out home*, *holiday time*. The *consumption at home* takes place at *breakfast*, *after launch and dinner*, in the *afternoon* (as snack break). For some respondents, this last consumption opportunity is driven by the chocolate; namely, to live more deeply the consumption experience of chocolate the consumer takes a break, and not vice versa (the consumer takes a break and then choose to eat a chocolate). *Out home* the consumption takes place with *friends*. In this case, the chocolate is consumed as complement of other products (croissants, crepes, ice creams).

First time usage

This factor can be traced through several macro-driver of the consumer experience specifically related to brand *Nutella*: *afternoon snack*, *grandmother* (“*she had always Nutella*”), *family* (“*breakfast with milk, bread and Nutella*”), *party (birthday party with sandwiches and loafs with Nutella)*. The first consumption experience in the consumer’s mind is emerged with clarity during the interviewed.

Changing over time of consumption

The deployment of this factor highlights that the consumption is under control for problems of diet or metabolism. When you are children the control on the consumption is carried out by parents; the adults, instead, have a self control, even if the consumption is freer (“*I take care spending*”; “*I eat it when I like*”).

Sources of influence

This factor is related to three main macro-drivers of customer experience: *family, friends and advertising*. The role of the *family* is the most pointed out by the respondents, based on the habits of consumption in the house (breakfast, after dinner, etc.) .

Consumption habits

The consumer approach is *individual* and *collective*; these are the two modes that form the consumer experience. The *collective consumer experience* takes places during *parties* and *moments of collective happiness*. The *individual consumer experience*, instead, is related to *situations strictly personal (relax, sadness)*.

Store choices

Relatively to the store the research highlights two macro-drivers of the consumer experience: *supermarket, neighbourhood shop*. For both kinds of store, the shelf where is allocated *Nutella* products creates a *positive and impressive visual* (thanks to *colours of the logo and packaging: white and red*), *emotional* (“*it’s familiar and fun*”) and *functional* (“*the jars are placed in ascending for weight*”) experience. The visibility of the product in the store has a particular role and evidence for the brand *Nutella*. For the other chocolate brands, the experience related to visibility on the shelf is lived with less awareness.

Product category: home console*Satisfied needs*

We have recognized two macro-drivers of the experience, which are core benefits sought by consumers: *to be fit, entertainment*. Relatively to the first concept, the respondents put in

⁷ For the youngest interviewers, the afternoon breaks with the chocolate cream take place during the study. For the others interviewers, the afternoon breaks take place during the work or when they are at home.

evidence that the need or core benefit *to be fit* can be traced by *sport* (the reference is to the *Nintendo Wii* as home console). Relatively to *entertainment*, the respondents accept the concept as *relax, videogame as playful entertainment*. For some respondents the home console don't satisfy the *need of relationships* (“*it is better meet and leave the free time with friends*”).

Consumption moments

Relatively to this factor, the respondents emphasize that the opportunities for consumer use take place prevalently in *winter: after study or work, after dinner, waiting for lunch at home, during the free time*. During the *winter* another consumer experience is related to *tournament night* that are organized with friends at *home* or at *friend's house*. During the *summer*, instead, the respondents say they prefer *to leave home, being outdoor*, therefore, the *frequency of play is reduced*.

First time usage

This factor can be traced through two macro-drivers of the consumer experience: *father's office; older brother*. The latter driver is related to the experiential concept of *imitation* of his *older brother* in game. The first, instead, is related to the experience at the *father's office* where, during the waiting, occurred the first game on *PC* (several respondents remember the play *PAC Man*). In fact, during the interviews showed that often the first usage of an home console was the *PC* got as *reward study* by parents.

Changing over time of consumption

The deployment of this factor highlights the evolving of the consumer experience with the adoption of home consoles gradually improved in technology (*graphics, real world, opportunity to play in group, opportunity to play online, etc.*). *PC, Nintendo, Playstation (1,2,3), XBOX* and *Nintendo Wii* is the sequence of the consumer adoption to improve and qualify over time the play experience. The majority of respondents showed that in the future will have *less time to play*.

Sources of influence

This factor is related to four macro-drivers of customer experience: *friends, online advertising, DEMO, reviews*. Both *society* and *friend* are traced by *emulation*, and this latter concept to *advertising* and *family*.

Consumption habits

The product use of the consumer is *individual* and *collective*; these are the two modes that make up the consumer experience through the usage. The *collective usage experience* is carried out with *multipliers*. The sense of the *challenge* and the *mocking* create experiences for the consumer during the collective usage. The challenge is an *opportunity to meet friends* and *to lose track of time*.

Store choices

Relatively to the store, the empirical research highlights that the shopping experience is fundamentally related to four channels: *internet*, *shopping centre*, *blockbuster* (for games rental), *small reputable reseller* (the purchasing frequency of this channel is low).

3.2.2 Findings at level of not experiential product category

Product category: casual shoes

Satisfied needs

It's possible recognize two macro-drivers of the category experience, which are core benefits sought by consumers: *appearance* and *leisure*. Relatively to the first concept, the respondents put in evidence that the need or core benefit *appearance* can be traced by adaptation to context (the shoes as “*visit card*”) and the *clothing*. Relatively to *leisure*, the respondents accept the concepts as *casual clothing* (T-shirt and jeans, mix between elegance and sporty), *every day life* and *feel comfortable*.

Consumption moments

Relatively to this factor, the respondents put in evidence two macro-drivers of the consumer experience: the *every day use*, the *use connected to the seasons* and to the *moments of the day*. To the first macro-concept is traced the *casual shoes*, and then *comfortable*; while the second concept unfolds with the seasons of *winter* and *summer*, and the *evening*. Drivers of consumer experience during the winter are the *sober colours* of the shoes; during the summer the *bright colours*. The evening is related to the concept of *elegance* as driver of the experience.

First time usage

This factor can be traced through two macro-driver of the consumer experience: *sport shoes*; “*I bought them with my money*”. This second driver is related to the experiential concept of

freedom of choice and the opportunity to purchase the most popular *model* (“*These shoes were choose by all my friends*”). For the first experiential driver, instead, it’s not uncommon that the respondents, not having the funds available, they found the *mother* as *constraint in choice*, because the *preferences aren’t shared*. The situation is perceived as a condition has reduced the experience of the first purchase.

Changing over time of consumption

The deployment of this factor highlights two key consumers’ experiential drivers which explain the changing of consumer needs. At the beginning the experience of the consumer is conveyed by *me too purchasing* and by *casual shoes*. This kind of shoes is related to other experience drivers: *versatility, colours, materials, quality/price ratio*. The shoes are an *accessory clothing*. Over the time, the experience is conveyed by aspects of *exclusivity, distinctiveness from the others*, to wear something according to the own *profession* and of *social belonging*. The brand that more satisfy the need of social belonging is *Hogan*.

Sources of influence

This factor is related to five macro-drivers of customer experience: *society, friends, price, word of mouth, family, advertising*. Both *society* and *friend* are traced to *emulation*, and this latter concept to *advertising* and *family*.

Consumption habits

The consumer approach is *individual* and *collective*; these are the two modes that form the consumer buying experience. The *collective purchasing experience* is carried out together *friends*, the *boyfriends/girlfriends* and *parents*. The collective purchases with friend are done when *on-line shopping* occurs, with *boyfriend/girlfriend* when *the preferences are similar*, with parents when *events* and *ceremonies* occur. For some respondents, the *individual approach* to the shopping is explained by the fact that the purchase is an *individual experience* and could bore other people.

Store choices

Relatively to the store, the empirical research highlights three macro-drivers of the consumer experience: *internet, shopping centre, flagship stores*. The consumer experience of the shopping centre is traced by two elements: the *autonomy of choice* (“*I like choose from only*”, “*the salespeople aren’t nagging*”), the *clarity* and *competitiveness of the prices*. The

consumer experience of the *flagship stores* are related to more concepts: *warranties*, the *advice of the salespeople* (“*I like to be pampered*”), the *size of the store and assortment*, the organization of the *products’ exhibition, lay out and shop windows*.

Product category: oral and dental care products

Satisfied needs

We can recognize four macro-drivers of the experience, which are core benefits sought by consumers: *personal care* (“*use of mouthwash to prevent caries*”; “*feel good about themselves*”), *feel at uneasy* (“*if you don’t wash teeth*”; “*I don’t eat some things*”; “*I fear*”), *beauty care* (“*use of bleaching products for the aesthetic beauty of teeth*”), *relationships with the others* (“*I’m embarrassed if don’t wash teeth, the breath can be bad*”), *dental appliance* (“*I have to use specific products*”).

Consumption moments

Relatively to this factor, the respondents emphasize that the opportunities for consumer use take place *in home* and *out home*. *In home* the opportunities for use are related *after meals* (breakfast, lunch and dinner), *before to go out*, and *before to sleep* (when it’s used even mouthwash). After the lunch not always it’s possible to wash teeth. For consumer opportunities *out home* to bring the toothbrush is uncomfortable, therefore are used the *chewing gums* or similar products.

First time usage

This factor can be traced by two macro-driver of the consumer experience: *playing* (“*My parents teach me to wash the teeth as a play*”); *toothpaste with strawberry taste* (“*It was eaten*”); *toothbrush with doll* (“*It encouraged to wash teeth*”).

Changing over time of consumption

The deployment of this factor highlights the evolving of the consumer experience with a different needs over time. The first *appearance of caries* determines a *more complete cleaning* of teeth and *more specific products*; when you start working you *can not wash your teeth too often* (use of alternative products: as chewing gums). Over time increases the *need for variety of taste and smell*; at the same time the consumers adopt more products: *mouthwash, whitening wash, dental floss*.

Sources of influence

This factor is related to three macro-drivers of customer experience: *parents* (when you are kids); the *mother* is the principal influencer because she is responsible purchasing in the family; *dentist* (that recommends the products).

Consumption habits

The consumer approach is *individual* and *collective*; these are the two modes that create the consumer experience. In this product category is predominant the *individual consumer experience*, related to the usage situations strictly personal. For just one of the interviewed consumers, instead, when occurred the first usage the experience was related to a *collective ritual after dinner* (with the brother) directed by the “*supervision of the mother*”.

Store choices

Relatively to the store, the empirical research highlights that the shopping experience is fundamentally related to three channels: *supermarket* (wideness of assortment on the shelf; research of promotions), *neighbourhood store* (*comfort*), *pharmacy* (specialized products).

3.2.3 Findings at level of experiential brand

Brand “Nutella”

As we said above, in the research design the analysis of consumer-brand relationships has been carried out on the base of four strategic dimensions on *brand experience* – sense, feel, think and act – in accordance with the theoretical framework proposed by Brakus, Schmitt, Zarantonello (2009). Also, the consumer-brand relationships are analyzed through the *free associations* and the *brand metaphors* that consumers relate to each brand surveyed.

Relatively to the four strategic experiential modules of the brand *Nutella*, the findings of the empirical research are the followings. For the first module, *SENSE*, the brand provides to the consumers a *sensory experience* through a multi-sensory involvement. The *visual experience* is generated by the particular *colours* of the product; the *touch experience* is traced by the “*fingers into the Nutella*” and “*to lick them*”; the *olfactory experience* is determinate by the smell of the *Nutella*, in particular “*when it’s hot*”; the *hearing experience* is traced by the noise when “*you open the jar*”. The taste experience is “*unique, unforgettable and inimitable*”. The second experiential module, *FEEL*, punts in evidence that the feeling experience of the consumer with the brand is determined by more concepts: *satisfaction*, *sense of guilt*, *enjoyment*, *the desire of cuddle* (“*make you relaxed*”, “*put in a good mood*”).

The findings on the third experiential module *THINK*, instead, emphasize a cognitive experience of the consumers through three intangible benefits: “*recharge*”, “*give energy*”, “*soothing*”. On the fourth experiential module, *ACT*, the findings put in evidence that brand *Nutella* improve the physical experience of the consumers, because it’s perceived as a product with a strong energetic charge. Therefore it’s related to a life style sports (“*I use it before and after the sport*”). Relatively to the free associations, the findings emphasize several main concepts related to the brand: *family, passion, cooking crepes during holidays (holidays with fiends), sweetness, the desire something of good, chocolate with bread (loaf), party, jar*. The findings on the metaphors associated to the brand by the respondents are the followings. If the brand *Nutella* was an *animal* would be: a *teddy bear* or a *puppy dog* to express the sweetness; a *cow*, a *squirrel*, a *fox* or a *lion* as expression of the product; the *cat* as the symbol of the house; the *hippopotamus*, an *elephant* and an *ox* to express perceived size impression (of the jar). If the brand *Nutella* was a *person* it would be: a *family* (grandmother, sister, brother, best friend, father, boy/girlfriend), a *specific person* (*the actor John Deep, Mister Ferrero, an ascetics, a Cuban dancer, the soccer player Lavezzi*); an *abstract character* (*important, affectionate, quiet, unselfish, coloured*). If the brand *Nutella* was a *place* would be a *place of party* (*football stadium, playground, kiosk in square, party city*); a *place in house* (*kitchen*); an *cold place* (*Chalet in mountain, city of Vienna and Prague*), an *exotic location on the sea*.

Brand “Playstation”

Relatively to the four strategic experiential modules of the brand *Playstation*, the findings of the empirical research are the followings. For the first module, *SENSE*, the brand provides a sensory experience through a multi-sensory involvement of the consumer. The *visual experience* is generated by the *quality graphics*; the *touch experience* is defined by the *vibrant Joypad* that have to be *ergonomic*; the *olfactory experience* is generated by the “*smell of burnt when you play a lot*”; the *hearing experience* is traced by the play in *Dolby Surround*. The second experiential module, *FEEL*, punt in evidence that the feeling experience of the consumer with the brand is determined by the *mental and physical charge* when you play. The *grimace to playmate* is one element which is manifested this charge. The findings on the third experiential module *THINK*, instead, emphasize a cognitive experience of the consumers. In fact, the respondents say that to play on *Playstation: stimulates thinking* (“*if there isn’t cognitive stimulus there isn’t play*”). On the fourth experiential module, *ACT*, the findings emphasize that brand *Playstation* is able to improve the *stimulus of reflections*, and *brings to turn to play football* (*Winning Eleven* is the most played game).

Relatively to the *free associations*, the findings emphasize several main concepts related to the brand *Playstation*: *pastime, relax, logo, main play, youth, derision*. The findings of the *metaphors* associated by the respondents to the brand *Playstation* are the following. If the brand *Playstation* was an *animal* would be: a *lion* (“*the strongest game console*”), a *tiger* (“*excellent performance*”), a *dog* (“*friend in playing*”), a *leopard* (“*quick*”). If the brand *Playstation* was a *person* would be an *entrepreneur* (*charismatic person*), a *comedian*, an *entertainer*, an *available friend*. If the brand *Playstation* was a *place* would be a *square*, an *airport*, a *closed room*, a *world where escape*.

3.2.4 Findings at level of not experiential brand

Brand “Geox”

Relatively to the four strategic experiential modules of the brand *Geox*, the findings of the empirical research are the following. For the first module, *SENSE*, the brand provides a *sensory experience* through a multi-sensory involvement of the consumer. The *visual experience* is generated by the *colours* and the *design* of the products; the *touch experience* is nurtured by the *comfort* of the shoes; the *olfactory experience* by the particular *smell* of the shoes; the *hearing experience* is traced by the *absence of the noise* (“*I don’t like the noise soles*”). The second experiential module, *FEEL*, punt in evidence that the feeling experience of the consumer with the brand is determined by two benefits: the first is *functional* (“*I know it fit good my feet*”), the second is *emotional* (“*I feel good*”). Both benefits produce a positive mood for the consumers. The findings on the third experiential module *THINK*, instead, emphasize a cognitive experience of the consumers through “*materials*” and “*comparisons with the other brands*”. On the fourth experiential module, *ACT*, the findings emphasize that brand *Geox* is able to improve the physical experience of the consumers, thanks to the comfort of the shoes. This benefit changes the consumer behaviour relatively to the *usage intensity* of the shoes (“*I wear them for all day*”; “*I walk a lot*”).

Relatively to the free associations, the findings emphasize three main concepts related to the brand *Geox*: *comfortable* (intangible benefit product related), *leisure time* (opportunity of use of the products), *innovation* (of the shoes branded *Geox*), *intellectual property* (that nurtures innovation capability of *Geox*). The findings of the metaphors associated by the respondents to the brand *Geox* are the following. If the brand *Geox* was an *animal* would be: a *cheetah*, a *turtle*, a *polar bear*. The image of *cheetah* is traced by the concept of running, the running to the sweat and this latter to the transpiration. The *turtle* draws the image the picture of a

“*objective reached steady*”. The *polar bear*, instead, the picture of a *freshness sensation*. If the brand *Geox* was a *person* would be an *elegant person*, or the *friend of all time* that help you when you have difficulties, or an *happy person and likely*, or a *person both elegant and sporty*. If the brand *Geox* was a *place* would be a *square* (meeting place), a *green space* (where “*it’s possible to be relaxed*”), a *mountain*, an *hill* (the nature).

Brand “Colgate”

Relatively to the four strategic experiential modules of the brand *Colgate*, the findings of the empirical research put in evidence that in the perception of the respondents is activated only the first module, *SENSE*. The brand provides a sensory experience through a multi-sensory involvement of the consumer. The *visual experience* is generated by the *product*, in terms of packaging and *colour* of the toothpaste, and *smile*; the *olfactory experience* is generated by the *pleasant smell* and *the smell that remains after washing*; the *touch experience* is defined by the creaminess of the toothpaste; the *taste experience* is traced by the *granularity* of the toothpaste.

Relatively to the *free associations*, the findings emphasize some main concepts related to the brand *Colgate*: *white*, *effectiveness*, *nature*, *water that flows*, *sage and mint*. The findings of the *metaphors* associated by the respondents to the brand *Colgate* are the following. If the brand *Colgate* was an *animal* would be: a *tiger* (“*strong taste*”), a *polar bear* (“*sensation white*”), *gazelle*, *squirrel*, *bird*. If the brand *Colgate* was a *person* would be an *family*, someone with a beautiful smile, adult, high (for the form of the packaging). If the brand *Colgate* was a *place* would be a *place with herbs*, a *mountain* (*green, without snow*), a *frozen waterfall*.

4. Discussion and managerial implication

The findings of the empirical research allow to some considerations that may have significant managerial implications. Both at product category level and product brand level, for experiential and not experiential categories-brands surveyed, the consumer experience is determined prevalently by psycho-social benefits, even if functional ones have a significant importance. This latter allow to nurture the psycho-social benefits and the same functional benefits (for example, the breathability of the soles of the shoes can feel good and permit to wear the shoes all the day). Both psycho-social benefits and functional ones are sustained by tangible and intangible attribute of products-brands. Therefore, the findings put in evidence

that the firm’s experiential platform have to work both on psycho-social as functional benefits that have a complementary role.

The findings at brand level, moreover, highlight the strength of the three key determinants of consumer-brand relationships defined in the research. In the cases of the two experiential brand (*Nutella* and *Playstation*), we have to pointed out the findings about both the favorability of brand image perceived by customers – based on the variety of positive free associations and the richness of brand metaphors cited by interviewed - and the strong presence of all four dimensions of brand experience in the consumer relationships. So, we confirm the findings of the first stage of our ongoing research about the experiential nature of these brands (Cantone, Risitano, 2010). Instead, in the cases of the two not experiential brand (*Geox* and *Colgate*), we have had an unexpected finding. In fact, *Colgate* – in accordance with the hypothesis – is confirmed to be a not experiential brand, characterized by a distinctive brand image perceived by customers – based on the variety of positive free associations and a relative richness of brand metaphors cited by interviewed - but with a latent presence of the four dimensions of brand experience (only the *SENSE* module was considered by interviewed customers). Instead, *Geox* – differently by the hypothesis – emerges as an experiential brand, characterized by a favorability of brand image perceived by customers – based on the variety of positive free associations and the richness of brand metaphors cited by interviewed - and a strong presence of all four dimensions of brand experience in the consumer relationships. These findings show that an innovative brand, such as *Geox*, could work with the experiential dimensions to create durable consumer relationships also in category product strongly related to functional benefits.

Moreover, the empirical research demonstrates the strategic role of experiential modules to manage consumer-brand relationships in long-term perspective and to co-create a distinctive value based on customer engagement. Many companies are co-defining – with own customers – the brand promise adopting experiential tools in the marketing strategies, such as brand community, event, corporate blog, non-conventional solution, etc. (e.g. *Apple*, *Red Bull*, *Harley Davison*, *Nokia*, *Barilla*, *Nike*, *Starbucks*, *Kenwood*, etc.). For these firms, brand experience dimensions could be in the future the key dimensions to manage and to measure the brand equity in a customer-based perspective.

5. Limits and future researches opportunities

As we said into introductory paragraph, the empirical research that support the theoretical argumentations discussed in this paper is based only on qualitative market research methods (in-depth interviews and focus group). Also, we have analyzed empirically, as pilot exemplum, just four product categories, two experiential and two not experiential, and four relative brands, two considered experiential and two not experiential. These conditions of the research design represent the main limits of the research.

Relatively to the first limit, as we said in the paragraph on methodology, the quantitative market researchers are positivist and deductive; they aimed to confirm or reject an insight or a theory or a research question, and are methodologically rigorous and consider the truth as objective and universal. The qualitative researches, instead, are interpretive and reactive, use an inductive comprehension of the phenomena, aimed to generate insights on a phenomenon which drive to some hypothesis to be tested with quantitative market researches techniques, are eclectic, consider the truth subjective and socially built.

The qualitative research approach adopted for this paper is based on two interpretive consumer research techniques: in depth interview and focus group. The main advantage of in-depth interview is to be explorative of the individual hidden and deep consumer experience and is focused on the objective. The main disadvantage is to be quite intrusive and obtrusive for the customer, and high spending in terms of time and resources. The focus group, instead, has as main advantage is to externalise and socialise the individual consumer experience, and to obtain scale economies in the explorative research process.

Therefore, in the future, could be useful apply other qualitative methods to widen the findings obtained so far, or develop a quantitative market research that integrate, confirm or reject the findings emerged trough the qualitative market research and above described.

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Obviously, the responsibility for the contents of this paper is ascribed only by the Authors.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1 – The conceptual map of the customer experience at product category level: the case of chocolate creams.

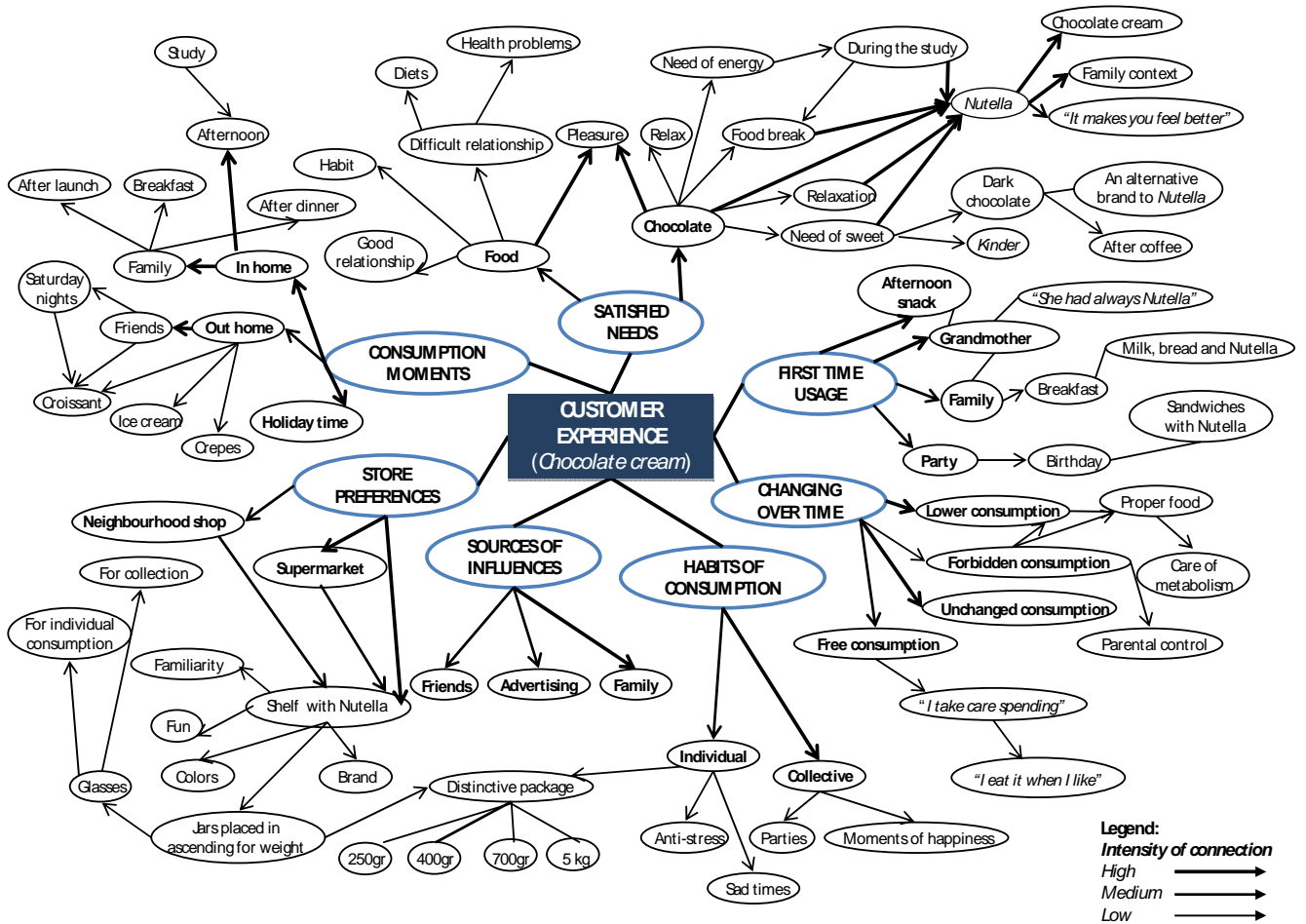


Figure 2 – The conceptual map of the customer experience at product category level: the case of home console.

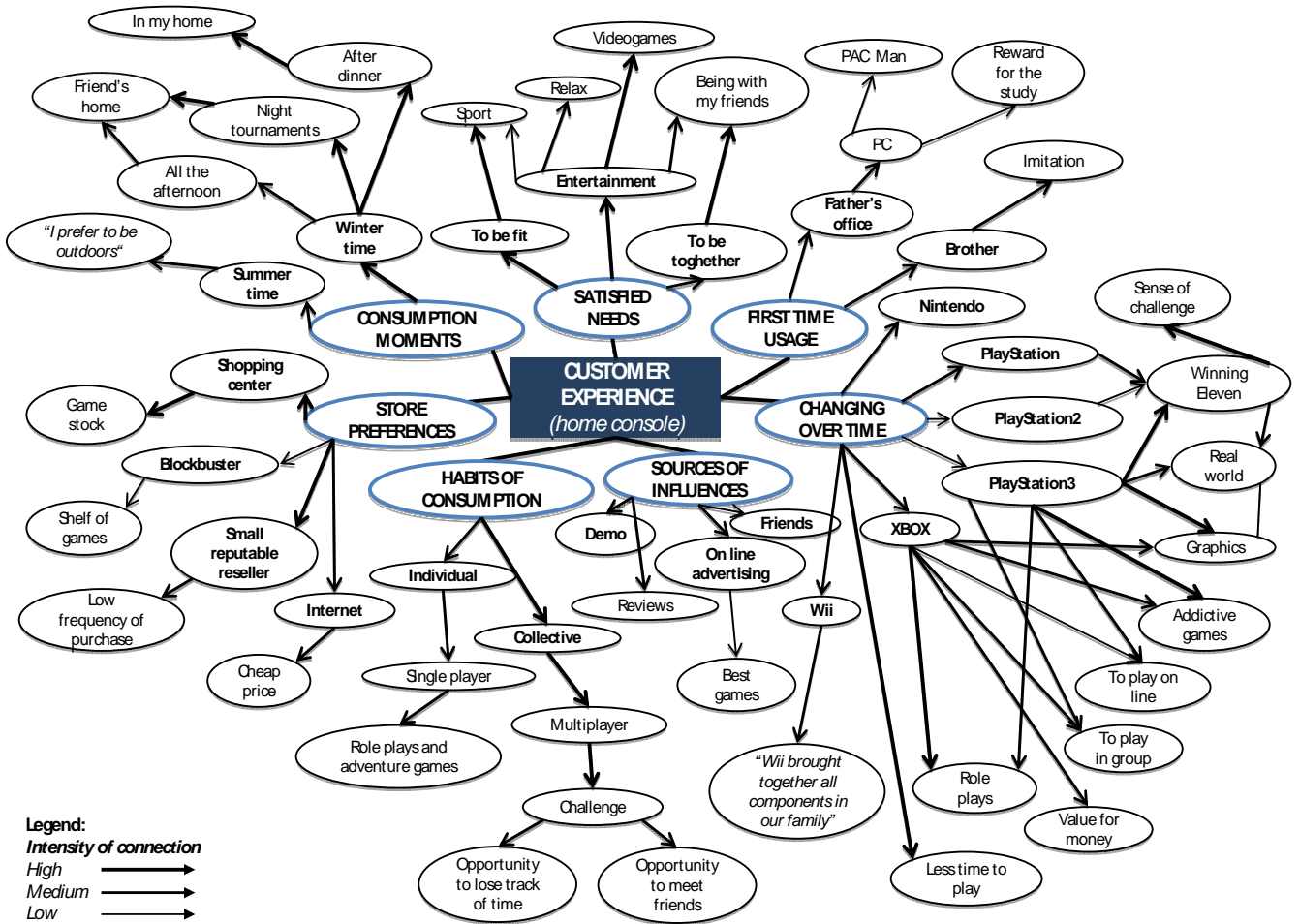


Figure 3 – The conceptual map of the customer experience at product category level: the case of casual shoes.

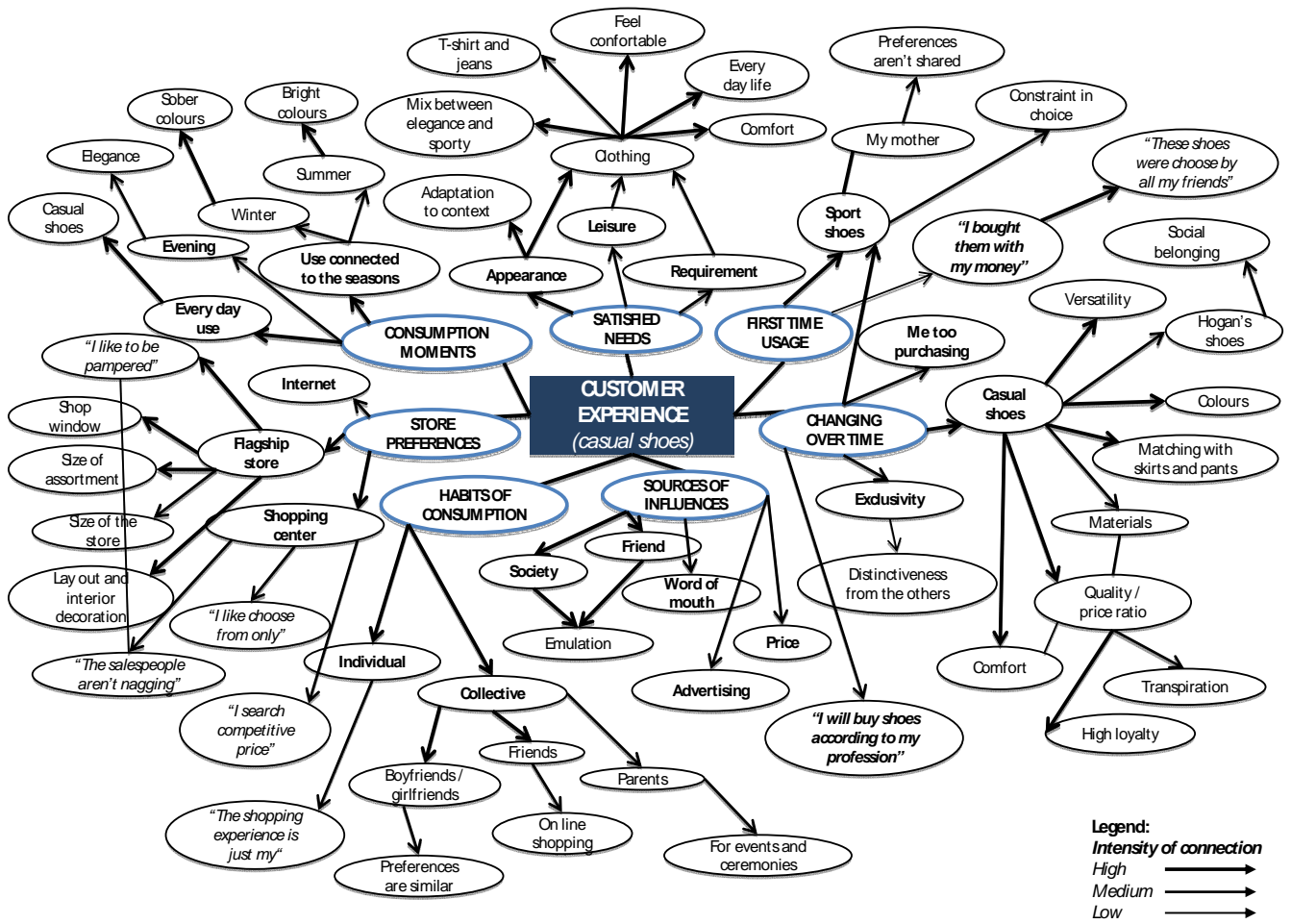


Figure 4 – The conceptual map of the customer experience at product category level: the case of dental and oral care products.

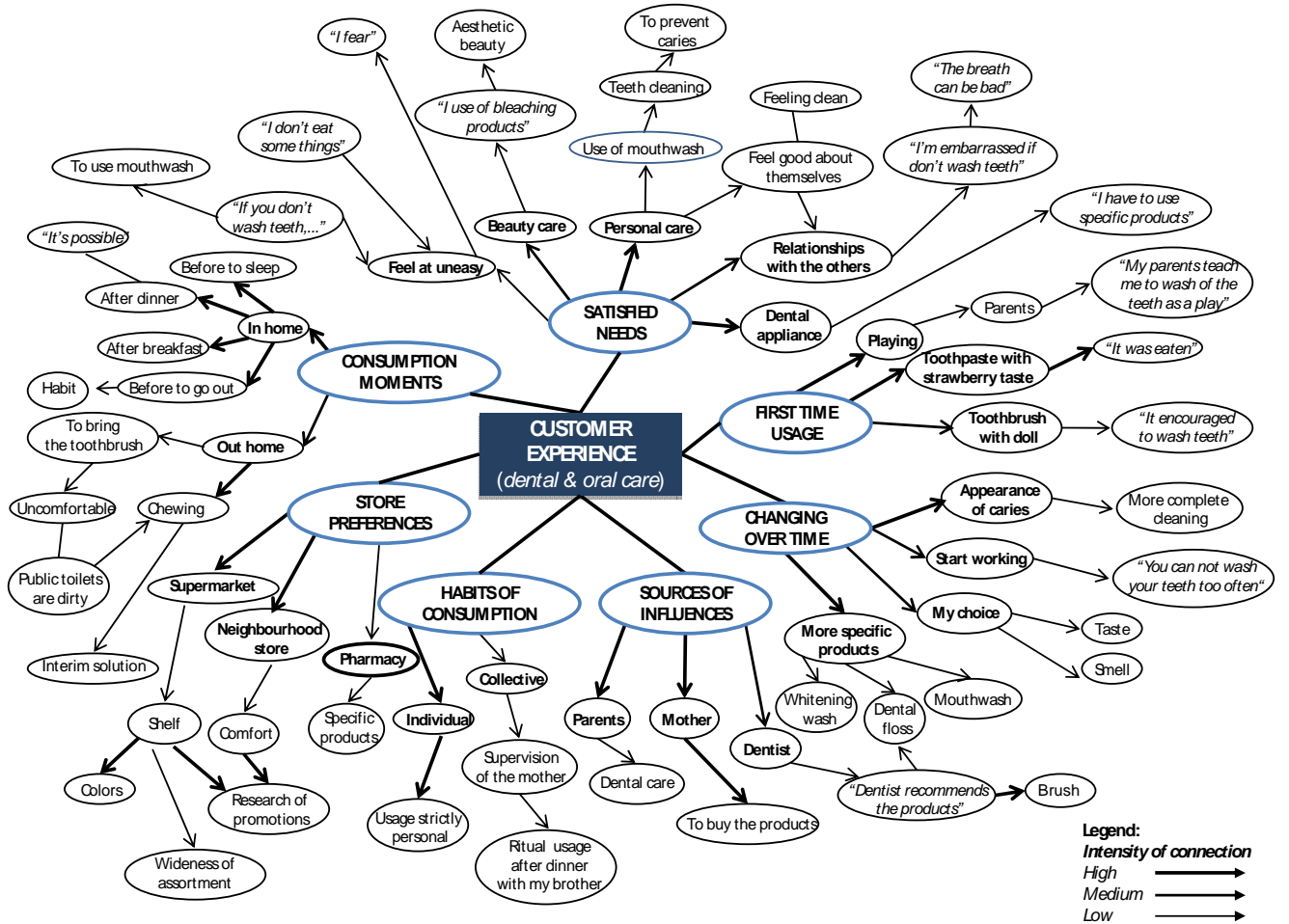


Figure 5 – The conceptual map of the consumer-brand relationships at brand level: the case of Nutella.

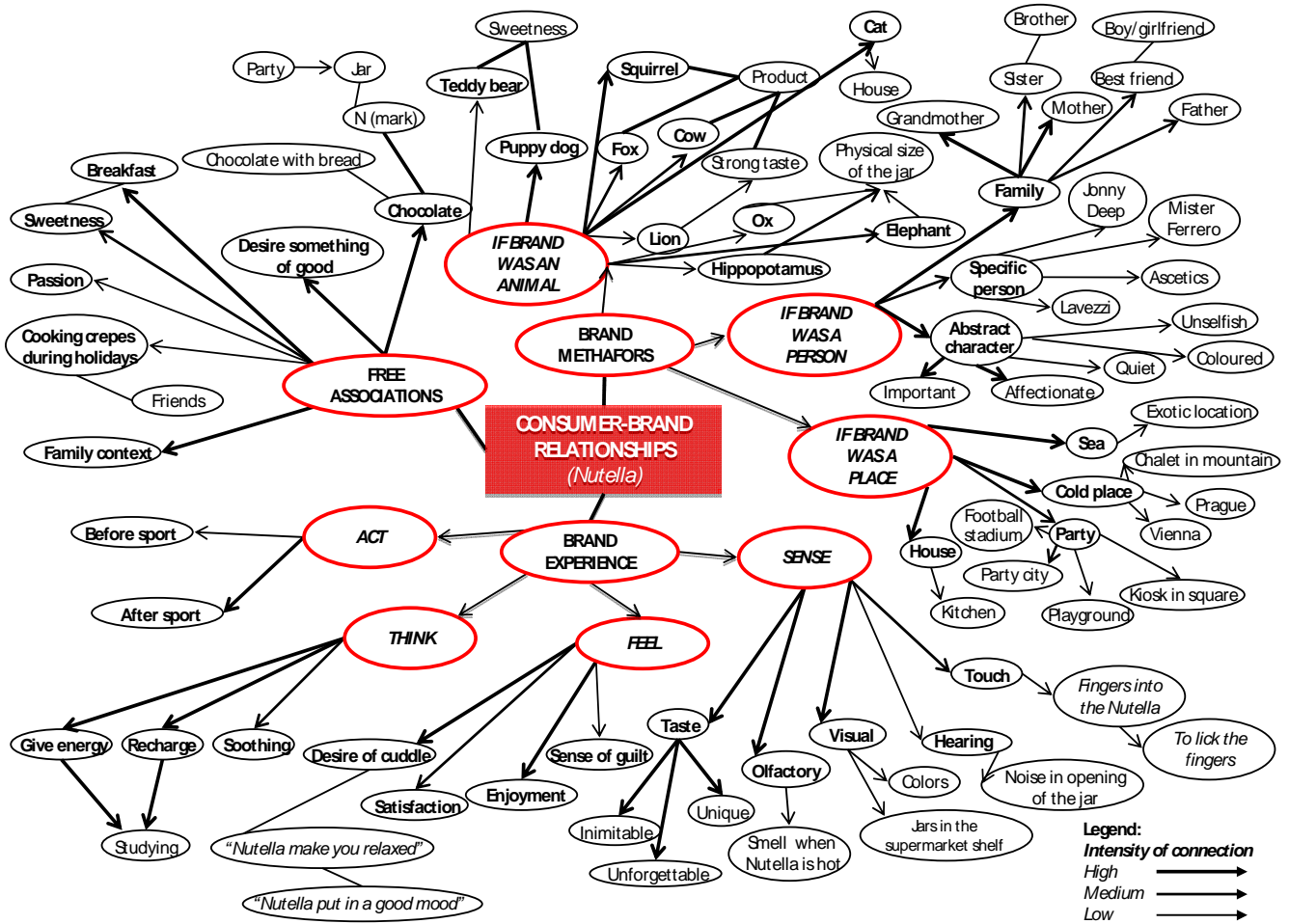


Figure 6 – The conceptual map of the consumer-brand relationships at brand level: the case of Playstation.

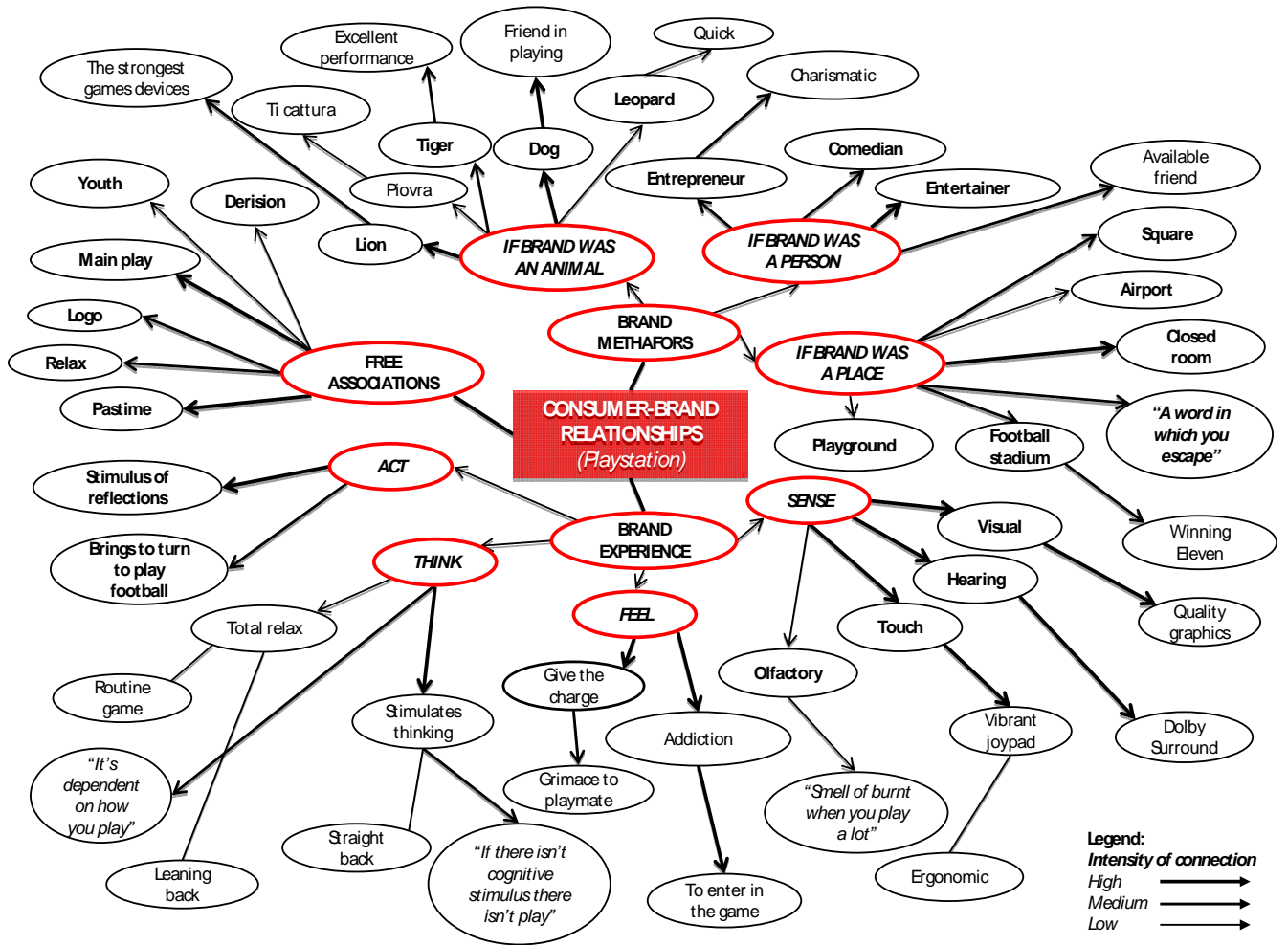


Figure 7 – The conceptual map of the consumer-brand relationships at brand level: the case of Geox.

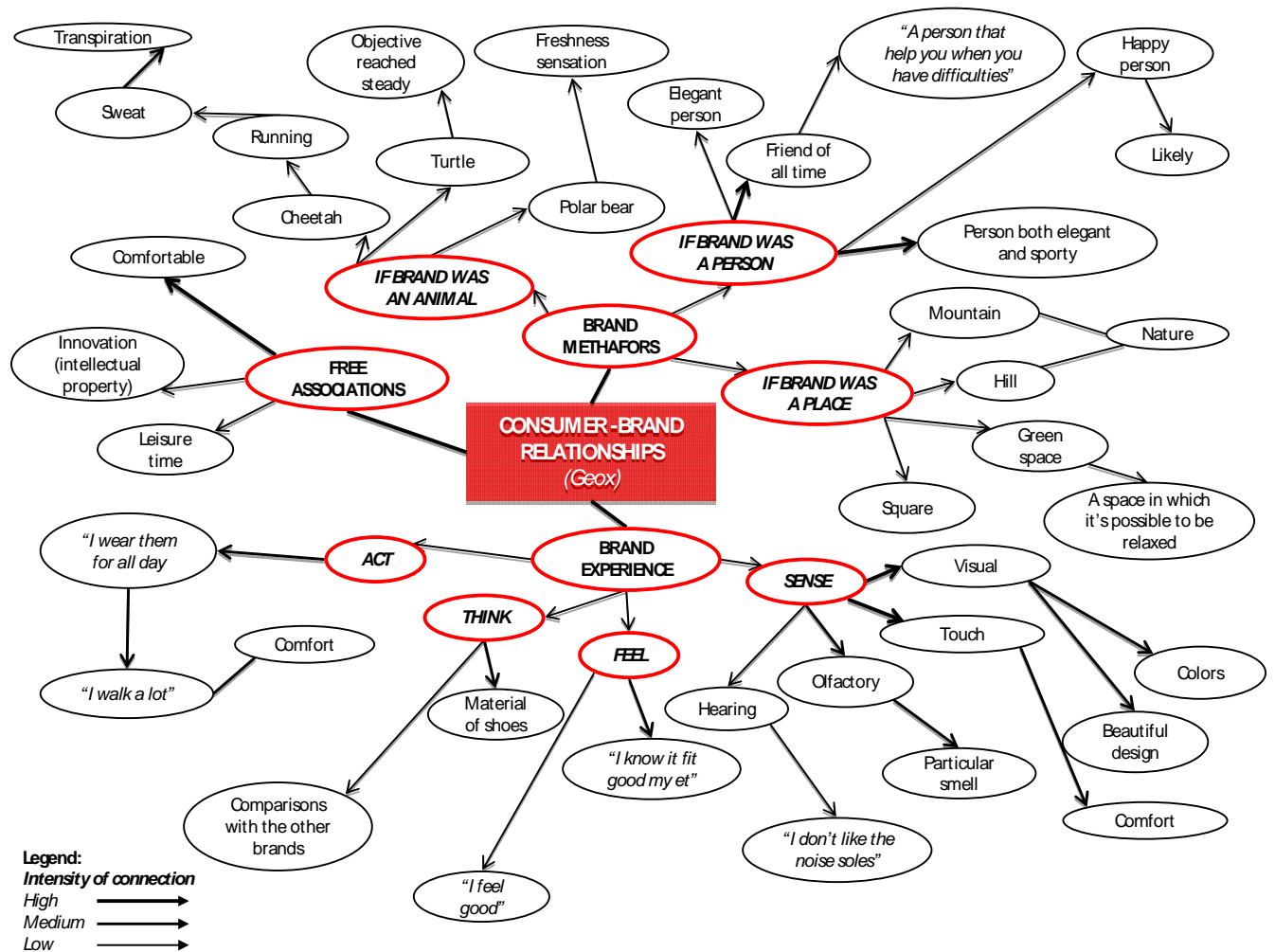


Figure 8 – The conceptual map of the consumer-brand relationships at brand level: the case of Colgate.

