

Luigi Cantone

Full Professor of Marketing and Strategic Management, Department of Business Management, Faculty of Economics, University of Naples Federico II (e.mail: lcantone@unina.it; tel. +39.081.675365).

Pierpaolo Testa

Ph.D. in Business Management, Department of Business Management, Faculty of Economics, University of Naples Federico II (e.mail: p.testa@unina.it; tel. +39.081.675365).

Giancarlo Agrillo

Ph.D. student in Business Management, Department of Business Management, Faculty of Economics, University of Naples Federico II (e.mail: giancarlo.agrillo@unina.it; tel. +39.081.675365).

Consumer Brand Engagement Exploration in Digital Environment.
An Empirical Research on an Italian Cult Brand.

1. Abstract

This article presents the main evidences of an ongoing research project aimed to explore, for some Italian cult brands, the drivers and the contents of consumer brand engagement in a digital environment.

New digital applications (digital brand communities, social networking, gaming, user Web generated content, Web 2.0), in fact, allow: a. companies to stimulate more easily consumer brand engagement in digital environment; b. consumers to activate spontaneous and independent initiatives involving the brand engagement and the interactions with other consumers; c. consumer to share values, performances, aspirations, critical judgments and feelings about the brand and/or its products and/or services.

The arguments proposed in this article moves in line with theoretical perspectives that consider the brand as a “social shared cognitive resource”, and not an “intellectual proprietary one”, and the consumer as “working consumer”. Also, the empirical study of the consumer engagement involving the brand Alfa Romeo is carried out in accordance with the social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schau, Muñiz, Arnould, 2009).

The specific aims of this paper are the following ones:

1. to analyze the “spontaneous” initiatives of digital brand engagement involving the brand Alfa Romeo and promoted by consumers, customers or non-customers of the same brand;
2. to conduct an observational netnography in order to explore the experience of the brand on the Web, based on the spontaneous conversations of consumers traced in the digital tools, proprietary (digital brand communities, institutional facebook page, Website) and non-proprietary ones (blogs, Forums, business communities, video blogs, etc.);
3. to pick the managerial implications out useful for Alfa Romeo brand equity management;
4. to propose a model of empirical investigation that might be applied to other cult brands, in order to identify brand engagement patterns.

Keywords: Consumer Engagement, Consumer Brand Engagement, Community Brand Engagement, Netnography, Text Mining, Qualitative Marketing Research.

2. Introduction

The market practices and the academic literature are showing a growing interest in the customer engagement (in the following labeled CE), consumer brand engagement (in the following labeled CBE) and community brand engagement (in the following labeled COBE). In accordance with the Oxford Dictionary, the term to engage means “to commit with someone or something”. Therefore, CE, CBE and COBE describe the active and productive role of the consumers in the relationships with the companies in order to co-create value for brands, its products and/or services.

The role of the consumers actively involved in enriching the value of the companies’ offering systems has been described with different terms in the past: prosumer (Toffler, 1980), co-producer (Wilkström, 1996; Norman and Ramirez, 1993; Lusch and Vargo, 2004, 2006a, 2006b), consum-actor (Cova and Cova, 2009), co-creator (Gronröss, 2008; Vargo et al., 2008; Lusch and Vargo, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), lead-user (Von Hippel, 1986), working consumer (Cova, Dalli, 2009).

The willingness, on one hand, of the consumers to be active actor in the value creation process, such as the interest, on the other hand, of the companies to co-opt the customers’ knowledge and competence (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000), and turn them in market value, are increasing even due to the spreading of the new digital technologies, in particular to the emerging role of online social networks. The digital interactive technologies (Cantone, 2000) offer the opportunity to facilitate the “conversations” between consumers and companies, and among the same consumers. Also, the new digital platforms, together with the empowered capabilities of consumers (Covà and Pace, 2006), foster the awareness of the same consumers to actively participate in the value co-creation processes. This active participation doesn’t always mean consensus and acceptance of the brand values, such as of the competitive choices that the company makes with respect to the brand, and its products or services. In some situation, instead, the participation assumes the form of conflict and resistance (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Price and Pe_aloza, 1993; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Hollebeek and Zinkhan, 2006; Cova and Remy, 2007; Wipperfürth, 2005, Holt, 2002), with the attempt of the consumers to reclaim the values of the products and/or brands, and to redefine a more balanced dyadic

and fair relationships with them. In other cases, the participative role of consumers is, from the beginning, widely collaborative with the companies, in order: a. to change the products and/or services features; b. to improve the performance of them; c. to create means and contents, as witnessed by the currency of the consumer generated contents (Muñiz and Schau, 2011) in the Web 2.0 world; d. to construct and manage virtual and physical spaces in which the values of the companies, and their brands, are established, defended and communicated among other consumers.

According to other research streams (Cova and Dallı, 2009), the topics briefly discussed above, put in evidence that the role of the consumers is hugely changing because they are - cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally - increasingly involved in the consumption and value co-creation processes. The consumer engagement beyond the expected and conventional role (Pervan and Bove, 2011) is increasing across multiple industries, not only those in which the engagement has been pioneer (i.e.: software, professional equipment), but even the fast moving consumer goods ones. Notable success examples of consumer brand engagement are: “*Il Mulino che Vorrei*”, of Barilla; the *community Ducati* for product innovation, of Ducati (Sawney et al., 2005; Marchi et al., 2011); “*my Nutella The community*”, of Ferrero (Covà and Pace, 2006); the brand community of *Lego* (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Kornberger, 2010); “*My Starbucks Ideas*”, of Starbuck.

This article contributes to the debate on the active engagement of consumer into the value creation processes, putting in evidence even the findings of an empirical research on an important Italian consumer cult brand.

In the next paragraph we review the literature on the topic of engagement, highlighting the different theoretical perspectives that nurture it.

3. Literature review

Several research streams have approached the topic of engagement with very different aims and starting from different theoretical backgrounds.

As highlighted by several authors (Ili_, 2008; Higgins and Scholer, 2008; Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011), the conceptualization of the engagement is seminally rooted in multiple academic disciplines, such as psychology, sociology and organizational behavior. Successively, the concept has spread marketing theory and

practice, that has explored the topic in terms of consumer engagement (CE), consumer brand engagement (CBE) and community brand engagement (COBE).

Following the analysis of Hollebeek (2011, pp. 786-787), in the field of psychological studies has been conceptualized the construct “student engagement” as “students’ academic investment, motivation and commitment to their institution, their perceived psychological connection, comfort and sense of belonging toward their institution” (London et al., 2007). In the sociological studies, instead, the concept of “social engagement” is meant as “a sense of initiative, involvement and adequate response to social stimuli, participating in social activities and interacting with others” (Achteberg et al., 2003; Algesheimer et al., 2005). The studies of organizational behavior, however, have addressed the concept of “employee engagement” as “the amount of cognitive, emotional and physical resources an individual is prepared to devote in the performance of one’s work roles” (Saks, 2006). According to these academic disciplines, the engagement is based, in general, on a strong, individual-specific, context-specific, motivated, emotional, committed, two-way, over time relationship between a subject and an object.

In the strategic management and marketing research streams the concepts of engagement isn’t a newness (Bowden, 2009, 2009b; Sedlyg, 2008; Neff, 2007; Voyles, 2007; Patterson et al., 2006), although the empirical researches supporting the theoretical frameworks are still relatively few. The concept has been explored in terms of consumer engagement (as relevant subject) , companies, products, services, and brands (as relevant objects).

Therefore, on the base of seminal theoretical backgrounds of the other academic disciplines, CE, CBE and COBE are part of a rapidly evolving behavior process investing consumers and business customers. They undertake huge changes that put in evidence significant organizational challenges, as well as strategic opportunities for the companies. However, one of the most critical difficulties for the companies to effectively manage the consumer engagement, and capture the emerging opportunities, is that the critical moments of the interaction between companies and consumers are increasingly spread across several parts of the organizations. Therefore, the engagement, to be deployed in an integrated way, requires actions of different organizational responsibilities. In sum, and that is one of the most interesting challenge for the Chief Marketing Officer in the future, the marketing activity shall coordinate the engagement across the entire organization, be

able to manage the “touch” points (Fickel, 1999; Grönross, 2006), or “moment of truth” (Carlzon, 1987; Grönross, 1990), that it don’t directly control.

Thanks to the rapid spread of digital-based interactive technologies, in particular of online social network Web site (Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, etc.), both marketers and consumers have been enabled to build and manage consumer-brand relationships with higher trade-off of reach and richness (Evans and Wurster, 1999).

In general, the communities can be built and promote voluntarily by more motivated consumers that lead other consumers or members to deploy various level of active participation and community behaviors that involve companies and/or own brands, products and services. At the same time, the companies are able to stimulate the creation of brand communities as a brand-building platform, and the engagement of the consumers promoting active behavior towards the brands, products and/or services.

Through the communities, the consumer engagement have assumed a relational dimension that emphasizes the collective commitment, not only individual specific, towards companies and/or own brands, products and/or services. In other words, the brand communities (Algesheimer et al., 2003; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006) or brand tribes (Cova and Cova 2002, 2009) become the engaged relational subjects that, in a collective and social dimension, carries out an active work towards companies, brands, products and/or services. Therefore, under this perspective, it has been possible to identify another concept of engagement in the marketing theory and practice named community or tribe brand engagement (COBE).

According to the purposes of this article, we’ll focus the attention on the concepts of CBE and COBE. In accordance with Hollebeek (2011, p. 790) the CBE is defined as “the level of an individual customer’s motivational, brand related and context dependent state of mind characterized by specific level of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interaction”. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 412) define the brand community as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. [...] Brand communities provide social structure to the relationship between marketer and consumer”. Shared values, objectives and actions, communal rituals and traditions, sense of moral responsibility, self-sustaining among members are some common characteristics of different communities.

CBE and COBE are constructs that predict and/or explain the customer behaviors better than some conventional metrics, such as, customer satisfaction and perceived quality (Van Dorn et al., 2010). In fact, consumers engaged in the value co-creation processes of

specific brands, products and/or services that they buy show more satisfaction and higher perceived quality. Also, they are willing to buy these brands, products and/or services, even with price premium because they are perceived to be more customized than standardized products and services of other brands. Therefore, consumer engagement is a primary driver of business performance (Sedley, 2008), sales growth (Neff, 2007) and enhancement of profitability (Voyles, 2007)

Following the analysis proposed by Cova and Dall'Aglio (2009) for “working consumer”, consumer/brand engagement has connections in multiple theoretical perspectives. Coherently with the aims of this paper, we focus the attention on the following theoretical perspectives: Service-Dominant (S-D) Logic of marketing and value co-creation approach; consumption experience; co-production in service encounter; consumer/brand communities or tribes.

The S-D logic of marketing (Lush and Vargo, 2004, 2006a, 2006b), such as the previous theoretical studies which have explored the concepts as co-creation and co-production (Prahalad and Ramswamy, 2004, 2000; Norman and Ramirez, 1993a, 1993b), although with different approach and aims, have addressed the value co-creation construct. These theoretical perspectives, however, put in evidence how consumers are always actively engaged as value co-creators; they share “operant resources” (Lush and Vargo, 2004) such as knowledge, competencies, skills, experience to co-create solutions. These solutions have chiefly value for themselves, in terms of cultural, affective, emotional, social, psychological and of effective utility. The role of the companies, in accordance with these theoretical perspective, is to ensure that customers’ co-creative capability can unfold in most effective manner.

Further theoretical connections can be found in the perspective of consumption experience. As put in evidence by notable literature (Carù and Cova, 2007; Holt, 1995, 2002; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), the brand consumption experience can be built in a pro-active way by the same consumers, and this experience co-creation process adds value to the products and services offered by the brands. During the co-creative consumption experience, the knowledge, competencies and skills of the consumers are involved and shared to enrich the meaning and the performance of brands, products and/or services. Obviously, when the experience is built and managed exclusively by the companies, and the consumers are passively immersed in the experiential and hyper-real context, the co-creative role of these latter is really very limited, if not completely absent.

The service marketing offers another theoretical reference point for the consumer/brand engagement, through the concept of the co-production in the service encounter. Several scholars of service marketing (Bitner, 1990; Eiglier and Langeard, 1977; Lovelock, Wirtz, 2007; Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990) have put in evidence that during the phase of service production the consumer has an active role (service co-production), interacting with the company (front office employees) with own resources, past experience, full knowledge of own needs and expected service value.

Analogously, customer/brand engagement concept has its roots in the theoretical perspective of “working consumer”, recently proposed in the marketing literature by Cova and Dall’O (2009). The Authors argue that consumers aren’t co-producers in the strict sense of the word, because they don’t receive an economic reward for this labour. Therefore, they might better defined “working consumers” because they perform “immaterial work” that creates cultural and affective added value for brand, products and services. This creative value is mainly shared between consumers through direct social relationships.

Customer/brand engagement, also, has a strict theoretical linkage with concepts such as consumer communities/tribes, brand communities, consumption communities. “A consumer community or consumer tribe is a group of people who have a common interest in a specific activity or object and who create a parallel social universe (subculture) ripe with own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary, and hierarchy” (Cova and Cova, 2002). The community is characterized by a strong sense of belonging among the members which leads them to act as a collective and a whole subject, for achieving of common purposes, before of individualistic ones. This collective engagement underlies any collective action regarding the interest for which the community was born: a brand, and/or a product, and/or a company, and so on. As stated above, the new digital interactive technology internet-based, and in particular the social network Web-site, have determined an increasing popularity of online consumer brand communities or tribes. According to Brodie et al. (2011, p. 3), a working definition of consumer engagement in online brand community is the following: “Consumer engagement in a virtual community involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community. Consumer engagement is a context-dependent, psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels that occur within dynamic, iterative engagement processes. Consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimension, and plays a central role in the process of relational exchange where other relational concepts are engaged antecedents and/or

consequences in iterative engagement processes within the brand community”. Therefore, the companies have to give serious attention to these brand communities in order to listen the consumers’ voice and monitor what they say about brands, organizations, products and services on social media, blogs, and other online Forums. Such monitoring should serve different purposes: a. engaging consumers into the product and/or brand equity development process; b. complementing internal metrics and traditional market researches on brand performance; c. testing customer reactions about launches of new brand-products-service, or changes in the brand-product positioning; d. capturing the changes of the brand’s sentiment across the consumers over time.

4. Research methodology, model of empirical investigation and research questions

4.1 Research design

From a methodological point of view, the empirical study adopts a qualitative marketing research approach on the consumer, explored through qualitative interpretive techniques (Sawhney 2004, Gummesson 2005, Spanjaard and Freeman 2006, Cantone and Testa 2010, 2011). In fact, the topic of brand engagement is at the date, in a certain way, under investigated and conceptualized. As pointed out by Gummesson (2005), theory generation is moving from raw data and description to conceptualisation and contextualization. “Conceptualization” means go behind the façade provided by the label of a topic. Nowadays the term brand engagement is always abused in management consulting industry and its customers due to the wide adoption of initiatives in the field of digital marketing, Web 2.0, social networking, user generated content, and so on. In this sense brand engagement is a cool and fashion topic. But the meaning given to this term is not always so clear for consultants and their customers, nor it is used in a unambiguous way. Moreover, the drivers on which brand engagement is planned or achieved have not investigated too.

“Contextualisation”, instead, refers to the need to place single data in a broader context, that is, generate theory. Theory orders data in a context (Gummesson, 2005). In regards to the context, it has been decided to explore the brand engagement for an Italian cult brand because only with reference to this kind of brand could be useful to investigate the topic more easily and deepen. The choice of Alfa Romeo brand has been driven by several order of considerations: a. Alfa Romeo Brand is one of the few Italian cult brand; b. it

operates in automotive sector which is also an emotional context in which consumers spontaneously activate on line to express their passion and feelings towards the brand they aspire to, buy or drive; c. Alfa Romeo has adopted long time a digital brand community platform to interact with it's consumers brand clubs wherever existing in the world. However, the Alfa Romeo brand, has been widely analyzed in literature (Covà and Carù, 2007) but not with the aim to explore brand engagement drivers in consumer perspectives. Anyway we think this article has to contribute mainly in term of: literature review and brand engagement definition; proposing a research process and elaboration model to investigate the drivers of brand engagement that might be considered replicable for other cult brand. This in order to investigate what are the main drivers that stimulate consumers to involve and interact spontaneously each other, engaging themselves with the brand on the main digital channels, and trying to investigate the hidden pattern existing in the data collected.

The empirical research focused on consumers, customers or non customers, of the Alfa Romeo brand, has been implemented in the observational phase through an approach based on a particular method within the marketing anthropology (Gummesson, 2005) that is netnography¹ (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2010). Netnography is a methodology of qualitative research on consumers that captures the information available in the public Forum on the Web. In accordance with the aims of this article, these information are useful to identify and understand, the on-line perception of the brand Alfa Romeo and the main reasons of spontaneous engagement of consumers.

In Figure 1 they are illustrated the modalities and tools by which a netnographic research could be implemented to acquire information from the grounded knowledge (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This graph has been considered as the potential empirical investigation model adopted in this article. On an axis it has been reported the research subject investigated that could be "individual" or "group". In this sense the kind of grounded knowledge that could be investigated may be deployed at two level of investigation: "shared" and "socialized" one, or "individual" one. On the other axis it's considered the nature of interaction of researcher with subject investigated. This latter, could be "not moderated" or "unobtrusive", when the researcher doesn't interact anyway with the

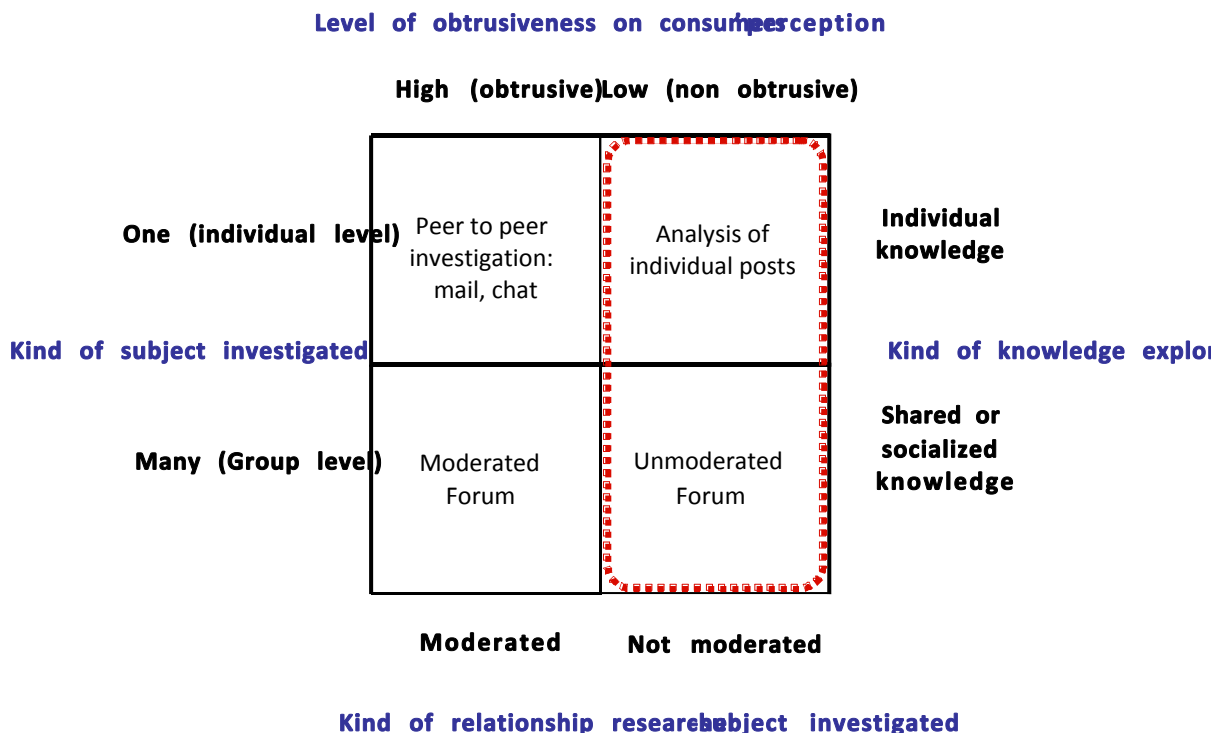
¹ The netnography is an ethnography conducted on line, or in other words, an hybrid and multi-methodological qualitative approach that through the combined and "integrated" use of several research explorative techniques (direct observation of online communities; digital focus groups; remote interviews, via email or chat, surveys; etc.) tries to develop an integrated body of knowledge of reality on this side and beyond the screen.

subject; “moderated” or “obtrusive”, when the researcher interacts with the consumer/s in order to further investigate the insights arisen in the previously research phase.

As showed in the Figure 1, in this article are presented the first main evidences of an ongoing research project on consumer engagement, using the information corpus acquired online only through non-moderated explorative techniques, that is conducting an unobtrusive and observational “netnography” (Kozinets 2002, 2010).

The left-area in the matrix of Figure 1, has not been explored yet at the date; therefore, it will be the focus of future research activity. Therefore for the next future it’s planned to administrate a “member checks” netnographic research phase (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 485; Hirschman 1986, p. 244; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) which is a procedure whereby some or all of a final research report’s findings are presented to the people who have been studied in order to solicit their comments. It is also planned to discuss with consumers at an individual level (chat, mail) and at a group level (Forum), the insights arisen in previous phases in order to deepening the same.

Figure 1. The model of empirical investigation



As stated above, the netnographic analysis “not moderated” - or unobtrusive, observational “netnography” (Kozinets 2002, 2010) - is an ethnographic research conducted on line in absence of a researcher who promotes or moderates consumer’s responses on a specific object. It has been carried out both at an individual level, through the analysis of individual posts, and, at the group level, elaborating the post on the topic gathered on the main digital automotive Forums (all the most important Web channels have been considered in the research). The posts are in a form of spontaneous individual or group expression, shared or socialized reflections, among customers and non customers interested in the brand.

In the following the research question that have been investigated by empirical study:

1. is reflected in the survey the consideration of a brand as shared social cognitive resource? Is the consumer truly helping Alfa Romeo CMO to improve brand management?
2. Which are the main drivers of brand engagement in Alfa Romeo Brand? Is Alfa Romeo brand intercepting those drivers and managing them appropriately?
3. The proposed research methodology can be an aid to research on brand sentiment and brand engagement?

4.2 The empirical research implementation and elaboration of data collected

Between June and July 2012 - during some education activities of the Master in Marketing & Service Management, University of Naples Federico II - some graduate students in teams were involved in the online acquisition of over 1,500 posts on Facebook, YouTube and automotive industry Forums (such as Quattroruote, Al Volante, Autopareri, etc.). The text corpus hereby produced was subjected to a first stage of data purification, in order to determine the goodness and the relevance of the posts collected. This former process of data refining selected 470 meaningful and reliable posts distributed as follows: 46 % acquired on Forum; 30% acquired on YouTube; 25% acquired on Facebook.

The posts’ treatment consisted in the elimination of the posts considered informational, technical or not consistent with the topic of brand engagement in a strict sense. Then the phase of purification and processing of posts has continued using T-LAB software² that

² Effectively, the software has aggregate the lexical forms of the text corpus having similar meanings in order to return a clustering of the terms used or produced by the individuals. The software considers equal

adopts of a set of linguistic and statistical tools for the analysis of text content or text mining. The text mining was carried out at two levels: the analysis of co-occurrence (or co-word analysis), and analysis of the thematic clusters (or cluster analysis).

The co-occurrence analysis is a methodology that allowed to identify and quantify the relationships of association between two or more keywords³ that are simultaneously present within the same elementary contexts. The analysis of co-occurrences is designed to return a summary of the keywords which are most often used in the communication or content of the posts and the relationships between them. Built on two latent semantic axes (Multidimensional Scaling - MDS) , the map identifies the co-occurrences, which are the keywords most often used by the Alfa Romeo, and the relationships among these words. The relations are much closer when narrower are the words on the chart.

The co-word analysis is the elaboration of a correspondence analysis on a tables of m rows per n columns in which the former represent lexical units (LU), or words existing in the text corpus, while the latter are textual units (TU), or text elementary contexts existing in the overall corpus text. In the empirical research TU are the single posts acquired on the digital channel, while the LU are the words used by Alfa Romeo fans in their one to one, or one to many conversations. The T-LAB permits to use several metrics (Cosine, Jaccard and Dice) to measure similarities between words in the text corpus. In order to elaborate the data collected, it was used Cosine measure. This co-word analysis is then projected on a Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) graph useful to identify the meaning of the axis.

Cluster analysis is instead a subsequent procedure that is used to represent the contents of the text corpus through a few significant thematic clusters. They are also identified on latent semantic axes, described by lexical units⁴ that characterize the sentences/posts submitted to the analysis. Moreover, the cluster analysis identifies the macro (semantic axes) and micro (clusters) latent concepts, or, in other terms, the drivers of consumers brand engagement interested in the Alfa Romeo brand, and spontaneously activated online. Therefore, clusters are defined as groups of keywords - very homogeneous within the same cluster and heterogeneous between a cluster and another - to which the researcher must give a correct and consistent interpretation.

singular and plural, masculine and feminine terms, and all those expressions that can be considered synonymous or equal (e.g. mark-brand, product-products).

³ Analyses presented in this article are based only on the keywords with a frequency greater than 6 occurrence, in order to exclude the words used less frequently.

⁴ We analyzed all the elementary context units present in the cluster, focusing on keywords with high *chi*₂, which is the indicator of the relationship between words and clusters.

This methodology has allowed to highlight categories of latent concepts that may have important implications for management of Alfa Romeo Brand.

As pointed out by Lancia (2012), the cluster analysis is based on K-means algorithm, hereinafter BKM. The BKM algorithm starts with a single cluster of all objects (e.g.: feature vectors encoding textual units) and it works in the following manner (Steinbach, Karypis & Kumar, 2000): a. pick a cluster to split; b. find two sub-clusters using the basic K-means algorithm; c. repeat step 2, the bisecting step, for a fixed number of times and take the split that produces the cluster with the highest overall similarity; d. repeat steps 1,2 and 3 until the desired number of cluster is reached.

5. Findings

As stated above, the empirical research has proposed two main objectives: 1. to understand the major projects or approaches pursued by the Alfa Romeo's management for developing the online consumer engagement; 2. To explore how consumers – customers and not customers, fans or not – have spontaneously undertaken initiatives of online engagement involving the brand Alfa Romeo, and its products and/or services. In the following sections are reported the main findings of the empirical research such as above described.

5.1 The findings of the empirical research on consumers

The co-occurrence analysis

The empirical research conducted on online users has been realized by the collection and subsequent analysis of 470 posts acquired in three different digital and social channels of interaction: Facebook, YouTube and free automotive industry Forums.

The text corpus was acquired in T-Lab software and treated by procedures of disambiguation and semantic fusion, proceeding to the selection of keywords and their lemmatization which led to a text vocabulary (occurrence) on which were conducted further analysis of multidimensional qualitative data.

Using T-LAB software was launched the procedure for the co-occurrences analysis, which returned the Multidimensional Scaling (MDS)⁵ map as shown graphically in the Figure 2. This processing has allowed to identify the relationships among the main keywords present at elementary lexical units (the keywords are graphically represented by circumferences: the larger is the size, the higher is the frequency of the keywords occurrences in the text; the closer are the keywords in the graph more often they are expressed together in the consumer context unit).

The process of analysis was aimed to investigate all statements individually expressed, within which occur the most frequent keywords (with higher occurrence). Thus, it was possible to identify the main concepts expressed spontaneously by consumers engaged on the brand Alfa Romeo.

As puts in evidence the Figure 2, in the upper right quadrant, it can be noticed that the first output of co-occurrence analysis concerns the words *Alfa* and *Romeo*: the two words, that together complete the name of the glorious brand of Italian cars, almost always occur together inside the entire text corpus. It's singular note, however, that in the vicinity of these words, there are others such as *Fiat*, *nostro* (own) and *distruggere* (to destroy).

Analyzing the sentences in which those keywords had a very high co-occurrence, it was found an underlining nostalgic tone, and, at the same time, very critical towards the FGA company.

⁵ In order to be useful, it's necessary that the two-dimensional MDS map has a stress value included between 0.1 and 0.15. Sometimes the best configuration in two dimensions may be not so rich and distorted: in this case it could be useful increase the number of dimensions. However TLAB software doesn't allow to do it probably because the text corpus isn't rich enough. Therefore, it was decided to accept the stress value detected as 0.1379.

(bind) and *museo* (museum) - the entire quadrant is characterized by a nostalgic connotation of, in support of an emotional dimension where, the words *storia* (history), *sportivo* (sporty) and *storico* (historic) highlight the deep link of consumers with the history of Alfa Romeo brand:

- *“They talk about German (product) reliability: even the Volkswagen has a history as the Alfa. It has become famous only producing car-shaped as Beetle, while Alfa producing racing car designed to win. That's why they (Alfa Romeo cars) are still popular, have the character and heart of sport who do not have the BMW cars”.*

It deploys a quadrant characterized by a critical-nostalgic tone, in which the phrases most representative highlight how Alfa Romeo enthusiasts are involved and motivated because they want express their disagreement with the policy applied at the corporate level by FGA. In other words, this quadrant highlight that Alfa Romeo brand management is destroying gradually its brand equity and the symbols of the history of this brand. The same situation already happened with the Lancia brand.

The lower quadrant on the right is characterized by words having almost the same frequency. The first co-occurrences analyzed concern the words *trazione* (wheel drive) and *posteriore (rear)*, which refer unequivocally to the historical models of the Alfa Romeo before the 80's. In proximity of these words are the ones such as *motori* (engines), *spider*, *modelli* (models), *competizioni* (races) and *gamma* (product range). They show that users express their opinions in relation to the variety of products offered in the Alfa Romeo range through the use of a technical and competent sound:

- *“Beautiful although not at the level of the 8C sister, which I consider one of the most beautiful cars of all time: the sporty line, the rear-wheel drive and powerful engine, for a not prohibitive price. I just hope 4C is the beginning for the Alfa of a new generation of models and not only a model in strictly sense”.*
- *“I would appreciated Alfa Romeo has completed the range with other cars, such as a 2 +2 coupe and a roadster with the same philosophy: sportiness in the foreground, the rest does not matter”.*

Other co-occurrences, in particular between the words *BMW*, *vettura* (car) and *competizione* (race), instead bring to light the performance of Alfa Romeo competition models in the past and the present.

- *“It must be said that Alfa is in a certain way better on the road than a BMW because it has acquired those results by the experience of the track and the technical choices and technology derived from its racing cars. It's what it does also Ferrari, Abarth and*

Maserati”.

Analyzing the co-occurrences identified in the quadrant, you can identify an orientation to the comparison of Alfa Romeo products based on technical and quality features which have always characterized the image of the brand Alfa Romeo. For example, the engine, the rear-wheel drive and the spider that retain a strong and alive memory in the minds of fans.

The third quadrant, bottom on the left, puts in evidence the keywords such as *Audi, Golf, DS3, Bravo* and *Punto*. All brands of cars belonging to foreign competitor company (Audi, Golf, DS3) or Italian ones (Bravo and Punto are brands of the same FGA). The meeting of these words with others - such as *macchina* (car), *design, interno* (interiors), *strada* (road) and *piacere* (pleasure) - highlights the issue of comparison between the different types of car maker in the market, national or international one.

- “*The Golf has a line of LEGO toy car. Giulietta means Italian style. Golf is equal Germans with slippers and socks to view on the beach. Mini on the market for years never gets old. Beautiful the front, a bit less the tail. This Mito is not an Alfa: it is like a Micra, but it is better the old 147. DS3 too futuristic, it will not like*”.
- “*We know that when cars were as bad as some say, in racing you were winning rally, GT and F1. However, I agree with those who say that now the quality has improved, and our design is never the same, unlike the Germans who produce and buy exteriorly identical car since 50 years*”.
- “*Once within the curve with my 147 I do not deadlift more accelerator and she is no longer distinguishable from the asphalt. I must be objective and Mito, such as Giulietta although a little less, it’s a FIAT in all if not for the mark. Put a Giulietta against a few years ago Alfa Romeo model, as a GT or a 147 itself, takes an infinite number of blows because in the curve it acts as a FIAT and not as an Alfa*”.

The analysis of elementary context units has shown that these keywords recall the product comparison of competitive cars mainly on issues related to aesthetics, about the interiors and the body, and technical characteristics such as road holding, object of pride for the true “Alfisti”.

Finally, from the analysis of the last quadrant, at the top on left, they have emerged some aspects related to the values of Alfa Romeo.

The first co-occurrence has examined the words *italiani* (Italians), *auto* and *Volkswagen*; these terms constitute a country centered consumer ethnocentrism, in which it is criticized the Italian not buying Italian cars. This interpretation emerges from the following sentences:

- “*I’ve always had Italian cars and have never broken. When I bought this Volkswagen I*

recovered my neck. The Passat people's car that cost more than 28,000 euros. The French buy Peugeot and Citroen, in Spain I have seen many Seat. Italians are not so clever. The preconception that German cars are more reliable than Italian is a theory that was founded in the 80's".

A second meeting of co-occurrences is set up between the words *Marchionne*, *glorioso* (glorious) and *piangere* (to cry). The analysis revealed a strong emotional aspect based on criticism towards the work done by Marchionne, CEO at Fiat Group, accused by the online users to have focused mainly on the economic and financial interests of the company, rather than the equity of Alfa Romeo brand.

- *"Great Alfa Romeo. I will always be an "Alfista", whatever happens. If I think about how small Alfa is today it makes me cry. Marchionne has finished "strip the flesh off" a glorious brand that really is golden and the Germans they are waiting to acquire it".*

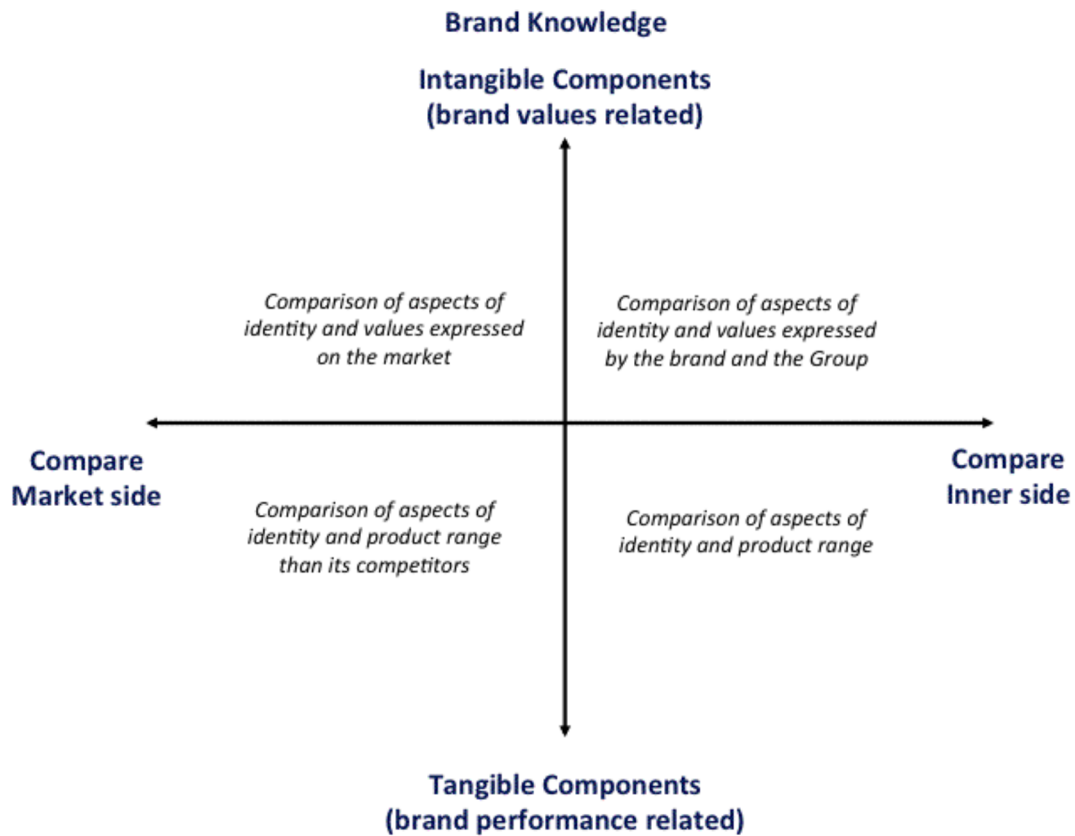
Further analysis of co-occurrences can be found in the combination of *Italia-Alfista*. A clear evidence that emerges from the joining of the two keywords emphasizes the great sense of nationalism the "Alfisti" have towards the Alfa Romeo brand, in their perception, true and the only symbol of Italian sportsmanship in the automotive industry over the world:

- *"I thank all the participants, Alfisti and not, for having demonstrated their commitment and love for this great brand, pride of our Italy".*

These keywords are thus consistent with the emotional and critical aspects regarding the values of Alfa Romeo brand in respect to those expressed by the entire market: the "Italian brand" encompasses the concepts of nationalism, ethnocentrism and criticism towards the company FGA.

On the basis of what is stated, it has been possible to synthesize graphically how consumers have produced spontaneously brand engagement. As described in Figure 3, the horizontal axis explains two important topics: 1. the dialogue among consumers about what the company FGA has determined for Alfa Romeo brand equity (performances, images, volume, etc.); 2. the effects on the aspects of market (products and/or competitors). In other words x-axis express an internal comparison about the present and the future against the past history or an external comparison with competitors on the market. The y-axis, instead, emphasizes how consumers have dialogued on issues relating to the brand knowledge, distinguishing between intangible components brand values related or the meanings of the brand and tangible ones brand performance related of this knowledge. It has been therefore possible for us to label the four quadrants as follows:

Figura 3. Brand Knowledge - Compare Matrix



In order to be deeper in terms of exploration of the concepts that emerged from the analysis of co-occurrences, it was decided to proceed with the cluster analysis to identify latent concepts in the words expressed by Web users.

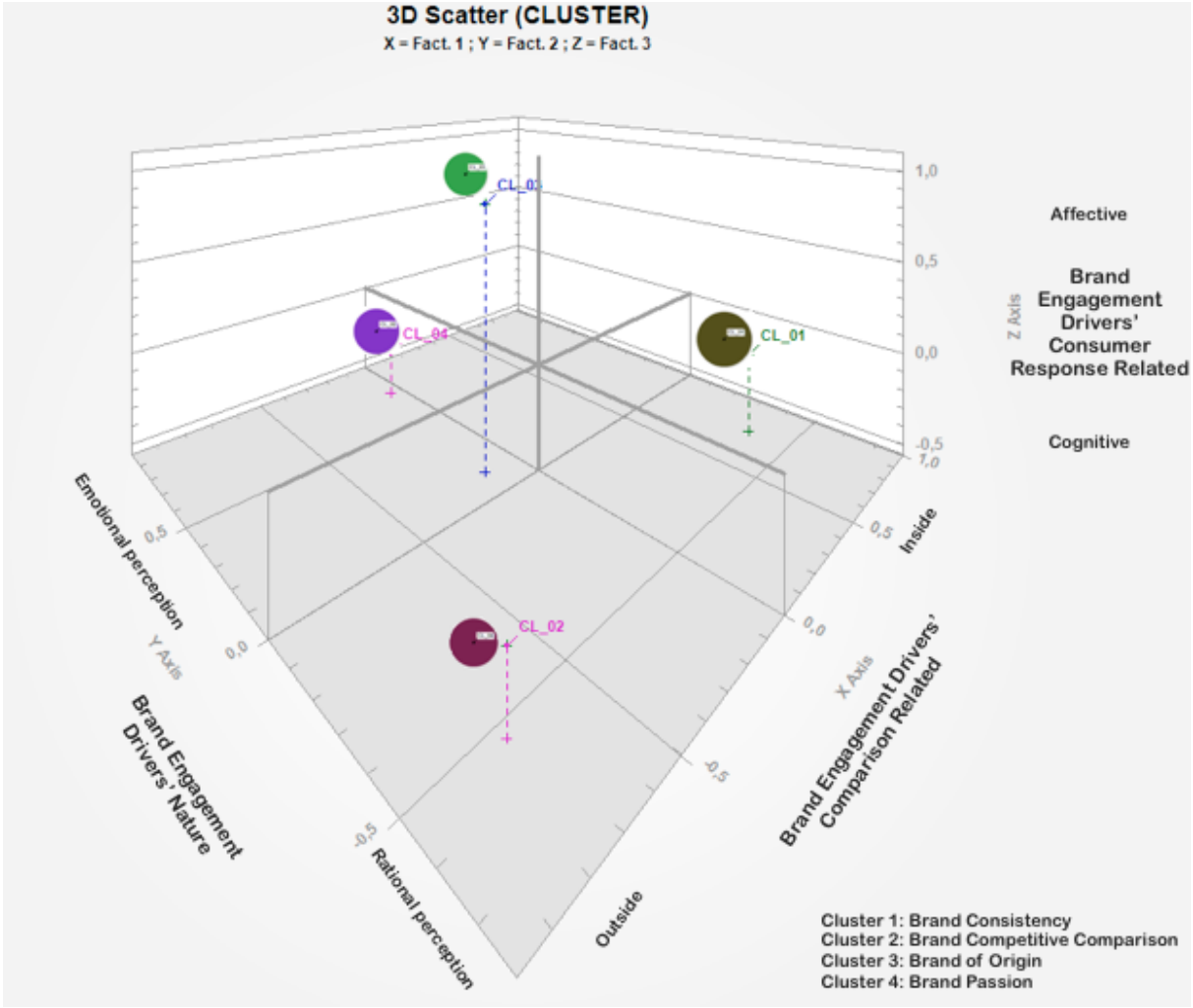
Cluster Analysis

As previously introduced, the cluster analysis has the purpose of combining the elementary context units contained in the entire textual corpus, within a few significant thematic clusters, to allow the researcher a deeper interpretation of the investigated phenomenon.

The procedure of cluster analysis conducted by the software T-LAB, has allowed us to evidence four cultural repertoires, also defined “thematic clusters”, distributed within a two-dimensional graph, as described in Figure 4.

Even in this case, the methodology of text mining supports the researcher in giving an interpretation to the qualitative data and a significance to the axes, or macro latent concepts, and clusters, or micro latent concepts. They express the macro and micro drivers of spontaneous consumer engagement with brand Alfa Romeo.

Figure 4. Cluster Analysis



Let's start from the cluster 1, which is placed in the lower right quadrant within the cultural repertoires in an isolated position than the other clusters, and opposite to the cluster 2. Clusters 3 and 4 are placed both in the area of the positive quadrants of the y-axis, in a position opposite to the cluster 1 and 2.

Therefore was decided to start with what is called the second axis (x-axis), trying to analyze the meanings of each cluster considering the keywords that co-determine each cultural repertoire so to interpret and name each latent concept.

Starting from *cluster 1*⁶, the most important Italian keyword explaining this cluster is *posteriore* (rear). It refers to the characteristic of rear-wheel drive (*"trazione"*) which for years has been the technical hallmark of Alfa Romeo products before the acquisition by Fiat Group.

Also there are in the cluster 1 words such as *marchio* (mark) and *gamma* (range). Consistently with the findings in the analysis of co-occurrences, these words highlight the attention that consumers turn to the selection of Alfa Romeo products: it is not a case that fall within the cluster the elementary terms as *berlina* (sedan), *coupé* and especially the verb *diventare* (to become). The latter, in fact, gives a sense of great dynamism to what fans would brand Alfa Romeo to become today, as expressed in the following statements:

- *"It 's the first Alfa of "my new course", it would be a very small 2-seater coupé with engine and rear wheel drive. The result that I would, should be an elise (with a bit of smart roadster) but does not have to break your back when is just a pebble in the street: a little less extreme elise"*.
- *"Alfa Romeo is made up of outperforming sedans, its history is made up of ouperforme sedans. In the future there will be offered coupe and spiders, but the essential idea of Alfa Romeo brand is a (sporty) dream come true (sedan every day). To realize only coupe and high performance roadster is the art of Ferrari, Maserati, Lamborghini. Alfa Romeo has to do Alfa Romeo"*.

In accordance with all the statements analyzed, it is clear that the brand has reduced not only the heritage of tradition, but also the strategic positioning of the brand relative to range characteristics, depriving it of iconic products such as *duetto*, and technical features, eliminating rear-wheel drive.

Web users, expressing their opinions through a highly technical dialectic, accuse company FGA to have removed some typical aspects of the original identity brand Alfa Romeo.

Therefore, the label associated with this cluster is *"Brand Consistency"*.

⁶ For cluster 1, which expresses the 32,24% of the total cultural space, have been subject to analysis the keywords which *chi _*, which is the indicator of the relationship between words and clusters, has a value not less than 9.

In opposite to the first cluster is the *cluster 2*⁷. It's interesting to note that this cluster groups four keywords (Golf, Euro, DS3 and "to demonstrate"). It emerges the comparison between the Alfa Romeo cars with those of its main competitors in the industry. This statement is also supported by the presence of other keywords such as *Al*, *Mini* and *Punto*, causing further out the comparison between those cars on both aesthetic and economic features. To support this interpretation we report in the following the main phrases that best represent the cluster:

- *"For me Giulietta looks like a Bravo swollen and a little "Alfa". I'm not convinced she can take the scepter of the legendary 147. We will see the evolution and acceptance on the market. The Golf is better than Giulietta because GTD, has better performance with lower gasoline consumption compared to Giulietta; within the Golf range, GTD is made better, the Golf is more spacious".*
- *"The Golf has a great gear both manual and especially the automatic one. It has also adjustable suspension that Giulietta doesn't have. In addition to these things, the Golf GTD is much more beautiful than Giulietta design that looks like a tapir. Then in my opinion the best is the Golf".*

The emerging concept mainly refers to the comparison between the Alfa Romeo cars with those of competitors, and especially with the brand Golf (Volkswagen). In fact, users express their opinions by comparing the cars both in appearance, with clear references to the vehicle design, both economically, pointing out that, at least in the past, Alfa Romeo had a better maintaining of the economic value in the remarketing than today.

From these statements clearly emerges, on the one hand, the typical values of Alfa Romeo, concerning the aesthetic elegance of the cars, and on the other one, an inconsistency with the values of the brand in the long period due to the loss of economic value of the cars in the second-hands market. This latter value was in the past, one of the best appreciated features of Alfa Romeo brand.

In accordance with these description it was decided to appoint such cluster as *"Brand Competitive Comparison"*.

As shown in Figure 4, the third cluster is located in an almost central position with respect to the two axes: this position, at first sight, has led to consider that cluster as a center of gravity with respect to the matters dealt.

⁷ The weight of the second cluster is equal to 22.40% of the total cultural space, even in this case we proceeded to analyze all the elementary context units and keywords with *chi* not less than 9.

From this cluster⁸- characterized by keywords such as *Italiani* (Italians), *stemma* (mark), *italiano* (Italian) and *macchina* (car) - we highlighted a series of emotional issues related to three concepts such as nationalism, patriotism and criticism towards foreign country product orientation:

- “*Good, buy the foreign country cars but please do not feel Italian! Italians do not buy Italian brands. Alfiat what is of more pleasure in being Italian (a sarcastic expression). The Alfa Romeo brand of the past deserved respect*”.
- “*The style Alfa is Italian as a dress by Giorgio Armani, you (the great part of auto driver) are like men that buy a chinese t-shirt on the market. The Italian style Alfa is like the Italian fashion houses style: I am Italian and Alfa is history, heart and Italian passion!*”.

From the analysis of post emerge clearly a sense of belonging and closeness to the geographical origin of the brand that it is expressed through three different concepts: in some posts it is clear, and consistent with the brand values, the nationalistic sentiment of those who buy or states want to buy or to recognize the value of purchasing Alfa Romeo as an Italian brand and for promoting the Italian economy; it is then recognized Alfa Romeo tradition, a superior product quality that clearly does not belong to other nation brands, and finally there is a criticism towards the Italians who, unlike the Germans, French and Spanish don't buy the cars produced by car manufacturers by their own country.

Coherently with its profiling content, it was decided to label the cluster 3 as “*Brand of Origin*”.

The last thematic cluster⁹, like the previous one, is presented within the quadrant at the top on the left, highly correlated to the vertical axis, and then in contrast to clusters 1 and 2; it is characterized by the presence of keywords that emphasize the emotional aspects that users feel towards the brand: *vincolo* (bond), *Lancia*, *cuore* (heart), *tenere* (to hold), *esistere* (to exist) and *pensare* (to think). In the following some phrases that better represent the cluster profile:

- “*As the heart of a 6-cylinder: for us, the Alfa is the car that has three cylinders, the remaining three cylinders are our heart, a different heart, a heart that beats. Actually, the Alfa is something spectacular, only those with a spider can understand how you feel like when you are driving*”.

⁸ For the analysis of this cluster, which explains 19.67% of the total cultural space, it was decided to refer to a *chi* _ not less than 8.

⁹ The cluster 4 shows the 25.68% of the total cultural space, with a *chi* _ of reference is not less than 9.

- *“We were the best in the rally with Lancia; the best on the track with Alfa and now almost no longer exist. [...] A lot of men qualify themselves as “Alfisti”, but sales of the brand does not bear track of them, I would change the point of view: we have to state a fixed point of how the market (consumers) would like the Alfa”.*

There are two complementary aspects that help explain the nature of the cluster: on the one hand there is the ultimate expression of love for a brand, represented by consumers, enthusiasts so spontaneous and sincere, they become evangelists of Alfa Romeo; on the other hand, there is the passionate aspect fundamentally linked to the history and the territory in which the brand was born and grew up. These aspects, which are consistent with the values of the brand, have allowed to label this cluster as *“Brand Passion”*.

Starting from the evidence arisen by the cluster analysis, it was then possible to give an interpretation to the meaning of the three factors in the cluster’s map as well as described in Figure 4.

The x-axis is explained positively by cluster 1, that we labeled *“Brand Consistency”*, and negatively by cluster 2, labeled competitive *“Brand Competitive Comparison”*. Therefore we decided to assign to x-factor the meaning of *“Brand Engagement Drivers Comparison Related”* (inside vs. outside comparison).

Relatively to the inside comparison the brand Alfa Romeo is perceived losing some features in respect to its historical heritage in terms of both past flagship car features (rear-wheel drive and spiders) and brand associations (car races) preserved even through the Arese Museum. Relatively to outside comparison, instead, the brand Alfa Romeo is perceived to have nowadays a better performance in terms of design and engine power, but a worst one in terms of second-hand car remarketing value.

The y-axis is explained positively by cluster 3, labeled *“Brand of Origin”*, and cluster 4, labeled *“Brand Passion”*. On the contrary, the y-axis is explained negatively by the cluster 1 and 2, labeled respectively *“Brand Consistency”* and *“Brand Competitive Comparison”*.

Therefore we decided to assign to y-factors the meaning of *“Brand Engagement Drivers’ Nature”* (emotional perception vs. rational ones). In fact, the brand Alfa Romeo in consumer perception, is related to an emotional dimension, in terms of brand passion and brand of origin, whereas the rational one, in terms of Brand Consistency and Brand Competitive Comparison.

Finally, the z-axis is positively explained by cluster 3, labeled *“Brand of Origin”*, and negatively by the remaining others 3 clusters. Therefore it is assigned to z-axis the meaning of

“Brand Engagement Drivers Consumer Response Related”. As well known in notable marketing literature, the cognitive response of consumers may be distinguished in: cognitive, affective and behavioral. However, empirical survey findings show, in fact a cognitive xx related to cluster 1 (Brand Consistency) and cluster 2 (Brand Competitive Comparison); an affective one related to cluster 4 (Brand Passion) and cluster 3 (Brand of Origin).

6. Discussion points

6.1 Is reflected in the survey the consideration of a brand as social cognitive resource shared? Is the consumer truly helping Alfa Romeo CMO to improve brand management?

The empirical survey showed what has just been recognized in the literature (Cova and Dallı 2009). The brand Alfa Romeo is considered a shared social cognitive resource, so the consumer feels fully entitled to report to the brand, with the exercise of voice. This perception is not necessarily consistent with the positioning implemented by management (resistant behavior). It is however a caveat: as we know, the consumer exercises a voice when dissatisfied with the brand, or in the case of mental and behavioral loyalty to encourage other friends or colleagues to buy product/brand owned (positive behavior). However, is useful to underline that the emerging evidences are related only to the perception of consumers who are familiar with digital media and emotionally involved with brand, or so-called “Alfisti”. Not all customers of the Alfa Romeo brand are “Alfisti”, this also due to the progressive industrialization of the brand that has been implemented by the management of Fiat since the 90’s after the acquisition. In fact, Fiat has given the brand a strategic positioning of modern automotive sporty brand, consistently with that of other brands in portfolio, to ensure adequate selling performance on the market. Today the Alfa Romeo brand is increasingly becoming a “generalist sporty brand” rather than a specialized niche one, and the firm is looking to leverage on the equity built up in the tradition of the past to conquer selling volumes. This strategy, however, is likely to dilute the brand that is losing in the consumer mind the characteristics of perceived distinctive identity so painfully acquired long time. The matter is not new in the industry if you think about what happened in the last decade for brands like Jaguar and Volvo.

According to some evidences in literature, even when the consumer reports a perception of the brand other than the one implemented by management (consumer resistance or

antagonism: Cova Dalli, 2009, Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Hollebeek and Zinkhan, 2006), there is an exercise of consumer in contributing to the improvement of the brand. The latter occurrence represents an opportunity for the company to stretch the brand values and perceptions that the consumer spontaneously assigns to it, and not as a result of a brand management deliberate strategy. Even in cases where the values and motivations of consumer's activation on the content of the brand should not be shared by management, the knowledge of the brand, as a result of conscious and spontaneous engagement by the consumers, may allow the company to educate progressively the same consumers about the different managerial choices adopted and preparing a gradually changing in its perceived functional and emotional bond with the brand. In this sense, consumers create a dialectical space with the brand aimed at improving communication and brand values (consumer empowerment: Cova and Dalli 2009; Denegri-Knott et al., 2006; Cova and Pace, 2006).

6.2 Which are the main drivers of brand engagement in Alfa Romeo Brand? Is Alfa Romeo brand intercepting those drivers and managing them appropriately?

The Alfa Romeo brand has understood from long time the need to activate consumer brand engagement initiatives even in order to control the brand communication and, also, to ensure that consumers do not pollute the message and the strategic positioning given to the brand. From the literature review on case history, however, emerges as the company is trying to activate all digital proprietary channels of mutual interaction with consumers. A strong focus on the future will be probably placed on mobile devices as there's the awareness that socialization among consumers is very strong in mobility when, among other things, the attention of the consumer is more selective and proactive. However, it seems, despite that the initiatives undertaken at the date, they aren't aligned with the truly perception of the consumers. In other words, we think that the company hasn't intercepted completely the brand motivation of engagement and the sentiment of on line consumers towards the brand. The company in our opinion has taken initiatives in order to control mainly the perceived positioning online. Any strategy of consumer brand engagement should start from an accurate analysis of sentiment and the motives of spontaneous consumers engagement. Only by knowing these latter is possible to understand the perception gap and define the correct message to convey with consumers through the various channels of interaction over the Web. This is consistent with the findings for other industries monitored, where, communication and consumer engagement online is implemented by a general push logic. This approach, in fact, looks more the consistency of the message transmitted online with the objectives of brand

positioning planned by the firm, rather than being aimed at finding a fine tuning with the truly perception by the consumers on line engaged.

In the perception of the consumers the company FMA and the management of Alfa Romeo had ability to leverage some important brand values such as the heritage in term of passion for the brand and sportsmanship (the “sporting heart”). But, nowadays, it does not really seem have, in accordance with consumers’ perception, the ability to preserve the tradition and history of the brand, as demonstrated by the removing of the historical role of elective Arese territory and somehow dismantling the Museum of the brand.

Alfa Romeo has lost some symbols of stronger brand product identity such as sporty engine, rear-wheel drive and the characteristic identity of range, or the “*duetto*” Alfa Romeo, which marked the birth and evolution of the imaginary consideration of the brand, also overseas (for example in U.S.A.). Some of these choices seem to be irreversible, such as that of the rear-wheel drive, perhaps cause the constraints imposed by the modular production and economies of scale achieved at the group level, as it is known, it is caused by the product platforms adoption. Others, such as the missing in Alfa Romeo range of “*duetto*” heir (produced from 1966 to 1993), is probably far only postponed for future product range development decisions, as was the case in the industry for other product cult brand of the past (Fiat 500, VW Beetle, Mini) and is in progress for other brands (i.e. Fiat Topolino and Citroen “*due Cavalli*”).

It seems that consumers identify a latent opportunity for Alfa Romeo brand management and the entire company FGA that reflects an inability in leveraging on brand of origin as a reason that should determine a greater propensity to purchase Italian automotive products compared to foreign ones. On the one hand, they emerge posts showing how the Italians unlike the Germans do not reward domestic products, given their attitude towards foreign country ones. On the other one, the empirical research on consumers does not fail to recognize to an Italian car brand as Alfa Romeo, characteristics of design, style and outperforms in respect to the competing products. In other words it emerges a perception of a superior advantage in terms of technical production and design at a country level, rather than competitive advantage in market performance.

From this point of view the new products in Alfa Romeo range (Giulietta, Mito, etc.) demonstrate to have a distinctive identity compared to those of the main competitors but perhaps they still don’t maintain the economic value over time and fail to ensure the same level of social status recognition like the ones mostly mentioned (BMW, VW and Audi above all).

If we consider the results of the cluster analysis at this point the consumers reports to the brand implicitly and unconsciously a proposal of brand engagement drivers on which to leverage in the future for increasing the equity of the brand. On one hand, leveraging the latent characteristics that can guarantee a perceived differentiation of Alfa Romeo brand, which are the passion and the origin. On the other one, emphasizing the elements of competitive superiority in terms of style, design and sport performances, in comparison with competing products, trying to reach the point of parity on other aspects of brand comparative evaluation (keeping the value of second hand car over time and status recognition). Finally, the brand should deserve a better level of performance on product/range's attributes symbolizing product identity achieved in the past. Moreover, the rediscovery of the spider, the enhancement of motorsport heritage and, last but not least, the rediscovery of the rear-wheel drive, which could be offered at least as an alternative for most hardened Alfisti.

6.3 The proposed research methodology can be an aid to research on brand sentiment and brand engagement?

The article does represent a proposal for a research methodology also useful for managerial exploration of the brand experience online and the identification of main latent drivers effective for activation of consumers in spontaneous brand engagement.

The empirical research has showed that probably the online brand engagement initiatives carried out by the Alfa Romeo management are shortly aligned with the truly perceived and experienced brand by consumers. The company act with many attempts to give content to the digital channels of interaction proprietary (brand community, social networks, video blogs) and not proprietary (business community, Forum, blogs), by leveraging managerial creativity. Sometimes this activities are implemented on the basis of the recommendations of Web communication agencies that have the limit to design online brand engagement initiatives as not completely integrated with the general marketing strategy of the brand and the company. These initiatives are often bordering at the level of mere creative and interactive communication activity with the consumers. By the approach adopted here, certainly improvable even after full implementation of the whole model here proposed, it might be useful to tune the online brand engagement with the truly experienced brand perceived by consumers in order to enable a virtuous circle of optimizing and management of the customer based brand equity. Through the exploration of individual and group digital spontaneous brand engagement activities, the researcher could, in fact, take part in the dialogue and active listening of consumers and contributes to give more depth to the concepts explored and the

identification of mental resistance of consumers to the correct perception of the strategic positioning designed by the management. This objective might be postponed to a later phase of this ongoing research project, whose in this article are described the first main findings.

7. Conclusions and managerial implications.

The topics discussed in this article put in evidence the following conclusions:

1. the consumer engagement and consumer brand engagement are enabled by the multiple digital interactive technologies, and in particular, by social network applications;
2. therefore, on one side, companies have effective tools to plan and design consumer and consumer brand engagement initiatives in order to co-create market value and brand equity; on the other side, consumers have the opportunity to engage spontaneously with the brands, products and/or services offered by companies, and contributing in this way to create market and brand equity;
3. the digital technology and applications (brand communities, social networks, Web sites, industry Forums, chat, micro e video blog, etc.) are open platforms that “democratically” can be explored to acquire competitive qualitative information, not only on own brands but on competitors ones;
4. the amount of qualitative information gatherable by this digital interaction channel is very large and, therefore, for mining this big qualitative data is useful to have a set of methodologies which permit to do it effectively and efficiently. It’s is critical to propose a consistent and integrated evaluation process of the empirical survey findings. In this article we have used for the posts analysis two text mining techniques: co-word analysis to synthesize the consumers’ expressions emerged in the online discussions; cluster analysis, to identify latent concepts underlining the lemmas or keywords emerging from on line discussions.

The article presents some limits that will be filled in the next step of the ongoing research project.

First of all, we haven’t explored all the proposed empirical research model aforesaid. In fact haven’t been carried out moderated Forum online with consumers engaged on the brand and/or dialogues by e-mail or chat with consumers. Secondly, has suggested by netnographic method, it hasn’t deployed yet the “member check” procedure. In other words, the empirical survey have been conducted without the researcher moderating the conversations.

Secondly, the findings of empirical research are industry specific (automotive industry) and media specific (internet based).

So, in the future, it has planned to overcome the research limitations extending the analysis on brand engagement in other industries, and trying to explore the topics even by different qualitative and quantitative research approaches, even in off-line context.

References.

- Algesheimer, R., Dholakia, U. M., Herrmann, A. (2005), "The social influence of brand community: Evidence from European car clubs", *Journal of Marketing*, 69 (3), 19-34.
- Arnould, Eric J. and Melanie Wallendorf (1994), "Market-Oriented Ethnography: Interpretation Building and Marketing Strategy Formulation," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 31 (November), 484-504.
- Bagozzi, R. P., Dholakia, U. M. (2006), "Antecedents and Purchase Consequences of Customer Participation in Small Group Brand Communities", *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 23 (1): 45-61.
- Bitner, M.J. (1990), "Evaluating service encounters: the effects of physical surroundings and employee responses", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54, April, pp. 69-82.
- Bitner, M.J., B.H. Booms, and M.S. Tetreault (1990), "The Service Encounter: Diagnosing Favorable and Unfavorable Incidents," *Journal of Marketing*, 54 (January), 71-84.
- Bowden, J. L., H. (2009), "The process of customer engagement: A conceptual framework", *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 17 (1): 63-74.
- Brakus, J. J., Scmitt, B. H., Zarantonello L. (2009), "Brand experience: What is it? How is it measured? Does it affect loyalty", *Journal of Marketing*, 73 (3), 52-68.
- Brodie R.J, et al. (2011), "Consumer engagement in a virtual community: An exploratory analysis", *Journal of Business Research*. doi 10.1016/j.busres.2011.07.029
- Cantone L. (2003), *La gestione strategica dei territori nell'economia post-fordista. Dinamiche evolutive e prospettive di sviluppo del sistema di produzione locale di Pomigliano d'Arco*, Napoli, Massa Editore.
- Cantone L., Testa P. (2010) Customer knowledge competence, consumer insight interpretive techniques and competitive advantage of the firm, *9th International Congress Marketing Trends – Università Cà Foscari, Venezia*, 21-22 Gennaio,
- Cantone L., Testa P. (2011) Customer knowledge competence, consumer insight interpretive techniques and competitive advantage of the firm, *Journal of Marketing Trends*, January 2011, Vol. 1, Nr. 4
- Carlzon, J. (1987), *Moments of truth. New Strategies for Today's Customer-Driven Economy.*, Ballinger, New York.
- Carù, A., Cova, B. (eds) (2007), *Consuming Experiences*, Oxon, Routledge.
- Cova B., Dalli, D. (2009), "Working consumers: the next step in marketing theory", *Marketing Theory*, 9 (3): 315-339.
- Cova, B. and Pace, S. (2006) 'Brand Community of Convenience Products: New Forms of Customer Empowerment – the case "my Nutella the Community"', *European Journal of Marketing* 40(9/10): 1087–105.
- Cova, B. and Cova V. (2009), "Faces of the New Consumer: A Genesis of Consumer Governmentality." *Recherche et Applications en Marketing* (English Edition) 24, no. 3, 81-99.
- Cova, B., Cova, V. (2002), "Tribal Marketing: The Tribalisation of Society and Its Impact on the Conduct of Marketing", *European Journal of Marketing*, 36 (5/6): 595-620.
- Cova, B., Remy, E. (2007), "I Feel Good: Who Needs the Market? – Struggling and Having Fun with Consumer-driven Experiences", in Carù, A., Cova, B. (eds) (2007), *Consuming Experiences*, Oxon, Routledge, pp. 51-64.

- Denegri-Knott, J., Zwick, D. and Schroeder, J.E. (2006) 'Mapping Consumer Power: An Integrative Framework for Marketing and Consumer Research', *European Journal of Marketing* 40(9–10): 950–71.
- Eiglier, P. et Langeard, E., (1987), *Servuction : Le marketing des services*, MacGrawhill, Paris.
- Evans, P. and Wurster, T. 1999: *Blown to bits: how the economics of information transforms strategy*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Fickel, L. (1999), "Know your customer", *CIO Magazine*, Vol. 12 (21), 62-72.
- Firat, A. F., Venkatesh, A. (1995), "Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (3): 239-267.
- Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm L. Strauss (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Chicago: Aldine.
- Grönroos C., (2006), Adopting a service logic for marketing, *Marketing Theory*, 6, (3): 317-333
- Gronroos, C. (2008), "Service Logic Revisited: Who Creates Value? And Who Co-creates?", *European Business Review*, 20 (4): 298-314.
- Grönroos, Ch. (1990): *Service management and marketing: managing the moments of truth in service competition*, Lexington Books, Lexington, MA.
- Gummesson, E. (1991) *Qualitative Research in Management*, Sage
- Gummesson, E., (2005), "Qualitative Research in Marketing", in *European Journal of Marketing*, 39 (3–4), pp. 309–311.
- Hirschman, Elizabeth (1986), "Humanistic Inquiry in Marketing Research: Philosophy, Method, and Criteria," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23 (August), 237-249.
- Hollebeek, C.R. and Zinkhan, G.M. (2006) 'Consumer Activism on the Internet: The Role of Anti-brand Communities', *Advances in Consumer Research* 33(1): 479–85.
- Hollebeek, L. D. (2011a), "Demystifying customer brand engagement: Exploring the loyalty nexus", *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 27 (7-8): 785-807.
- Hollebeek, L. D. (2011b), "Exploring customer brand engagement: definition and themes", *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 19:7, 555-573.
- Holt, D. B. (1995), "How Consumers Consume – a Typology of Consumption Practices", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (1): 1-16.
- Holt, D. B. (2002), "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (1): 70-90.
- Ili, A. (2008), Toward a conceptualization of consumer engagement in online communities: A netnographic study of vibration training online community, *Unpublished master's thesis*, University of Auckland, Department of Marketing, New Zealand.
- Kozinets R.V. (2010), *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, New York, Sage.
- Kozinets R.V. (2002), The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography For Marketing Research in Online Communities, *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vo. 39, N° 1, pp. 61-72.
- Kozinets R.V.(1998), "On Netnography: Initial Reflections on Consumer Research Investigations of Cyberculture", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Volume 25.
- Kozinets, R.V. and Handelman, J.M. (2004) 'Adversaries of Consumption: Consumer Movements, Activism, and Ideology', *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(3): 691–704.
- Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Egon G. Guba (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- London, B., Downey, G., Mace, S. (2007), "Psychological theories of educational management: A multi-method approach to studying individual engagement and institutional change", *Vanderbilt Law Review*, 60 (2): 455-481.
- Lovelock C. and Wirtz J. (2007). *Services Marketing: People, technology, strategy*. 6th Ed. Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Lusch, R. F., Vargo, S.L. (2006a), *Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing: Dialog, Debate, and Directions*, Armonk, New York.
- Lusch, R. F., Vargo, S.L. (2006b), "Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing: Reactions, Reflections and Refinements", *Marketing Theory*, 6 (3): 281-288.
- Muniz, A., M. Jr., and Schau H.J. (2011), "How to Inspire Value-Laden Collaborative Consumer-Generated Content", *Business Horizons*, 554 (3): 209-217.

- Muniz, A., M. Jr., and O'Guinn Th. C. (2001), "Brand Community," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (4): 412-32.
- Norman, R. and Ramírez, R. (1993) Designing interactive strategy: From value chain to value constellation. *Harvard Business Review*, 71 (4): 65-77
- Oliver, R. (1999), "Whence customer loyalty?", *Journal of Marketing*, 63 (4): 33-44.
- Parasuraman, A., Zeithmanl, V.A., Berry, L. L. (1988), "SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality", *Journal of Retailing*, (64 (1): 12-40.
- Peñaloza, L., Price L. L. (1993), "Consumer Resistance – a Conceptual Overview", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 20 (1): 123-128.
- Pervan, S., Bove, L.L. (2011), "The engagement of customer beyond their expected roles", *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 19 (7): 551-554.
- Pinnegar, S. and Daynes, J. S. (2007), "Locating narrative inquiry historically. Thematics in the turn to narrative", in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, Pearson Education Limited, United Kingdom, pp. 3-8.
- Prahalad, C. K., Ramaswamy, V. (2004), *The Future of Competition: Co-creating Unique Value With Customers*, Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, MA.
- Prahalad, C. K., Ramaswamy, V. (2000), "Co-Opting Customer Competence, *Harvard Business Review*, 78 (1): 79-88.
- Reckwitz, A. (2002), "Towards a Theory of Social Practice: A Development in Cultural Theorizing, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5 (2): 243-262.
- Resnick, E. (2001), "Defining engagement", *Journal of International Affairs*, 54 (2), 552-556.
- Riessman CK 2001. Analysis of personal narratives. In: JF Gubrium & JA Holstein (eds). *Handbook of interviewing research: Content and method*. London: Sage Publications.
- Rust, R. T., Lemon, K. N., Zeithaml, V.A. (2004), "Return on marketing: using customer equity to focus marketing strategy", *Journal of Marketing*, 68 (1): 109-127.
- Saks, A. M. (2006), "Antecedents and consequences of employee engagement", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 21 (7): 600-619.
- Sawhney, M. (2004), "Insights into Customer Insights", *CRM Project*, Volume 5, October, pp-2-4.
- Schau H.J., Muñoz A. M. Jr., Arnould E.J. (2009), "How Brand Community Practices Create Value", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 73, No. 5, pp. 30-51.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Martinez, I. M., Pinto, A. M., Salanova, M. Bakker, A. B. (2002), "Burnout and engagement to university student: A cross-national study", *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 33 (5): 464-481.
- Service Research*, 13 (3), 253-266.
- Spanjaard, D. Freeman, L. (2006), Is Qualitative Research always Exploratory?, *Conference 2006, Hosted by the School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business, Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy (ANZMAC)*, Qut 4-6 December, Brisbane Queensland.
- Van Doorn, J., Lemon, K.E., Mittal, V., Na_, S., Pick, D., Pirner, P. and Verhoef, P.C. (2010), "Customer Engagement Behavior: Theoretical Foundations and Research Directions," *Journal of*
- Vargo, S. L. and Lusch, R. F. (2008a) Service-dominant logic: Continuing the evolution. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 36(1), 1–10.
- Vargo, S. L., Lusch, R. F. (2004), "Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing", *Journal of Marketing*, 68 (1), 1–17.
- Verhoef, P. C., Lemon, K. N., Parasuraman, A., Roggeveen, A., Tsiros, M., Schlesinger, L. A. (2009), "Customer experience creation: Determinants, dynamics and management strategies", *Journal of Retailing*, 85 (1): 31-41.
- Von Hippel, E. (1986), "Lead Users: A source of Novel Product Concepts", *Management Science*, 32 (7): 791-805.
- Wipperfurth, A. (2005), *Brand Hijack: Marketing without Marketing*, Portfolio, New York.
- Yin, R. K. (2002), *Case Study Research. Design and Methods. Third Edition. Applied social research method series*, Volume 5. Sage Publications. California., ISBN 0-7619-2553-8
- Zeithalm, V.A. (1988), "Consumer perceptions of price, quality, and value: A means-end model and synthesis of evidence", *Journal of Marketing*, 52 (3): 2-21.
- Zwick, D., Bonsu, S. K., Darmody, A. (2008), "Putting Consumers to Work: 'Co-creation' and New Marketing Govern-mentality", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8 (2): 163-196.

Sitography.

www.quattroruote.it/Forums/

www.alvolante.it/

www.autopareri.com/Forum/

www.pdregionelombardia.it/approfondimenti/arese/arese.htm