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The impact of brand experience and brand trust on brand-self connection: a comparative analysis.

Abstract.

In the hypercompetitive markets, building consumer-brand relationships (CBR) is one of the most important critical successful factors to differentiate brands and to develop life time customer value. The paper studies the relationships among some selected brand equity drivers to sustain CBR competitive advantage. So, we define an empirical research to analyse the impact of brand experience and brand trust on brand-self connection, as critical dimension of sustainable consumer-brand relationship. More in depth, the aims of the paper are the following: 1. to measure the strength of the relationships among these brand equity drivers; 2. to demonstrate the predictive capacity of brand trust and brand experience related to brand-self connection; 3. to evaluate the different intensity of these relationships among different analyzed product categories (shopping versus speciality goods).

Keywords: *Brand experience, brand trust, brand-self connection, consumer-brand relationship, structural equation model.*

1. Introduction

The studies on brand equity have been developed by marketing academics for more than two decades (e.g. Farquhar, 1989; Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993, 2001, 2003). In his pivotal work, Aaker (1991) classified the key five category of assets to create brand equity: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets. Keller (1993) defined the concept of customer-based brand equity (CBBE) as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on customer response to the marketing of the brand”. The same Author (2001, 2003) delineated the CBBE pyramid to manage consumer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998; Aggarwal, 2004; Miller, Fournier, Allen, 2012), identifying six brand-building block: brand salience, brand performance, brand imagery, brand judgments, brand feelings, brand resonance. In the last years, many studies have validated the original scale to measure brand equity and/or have analyzed the relationships among brand equity drivers (Agarwal, Rao, 1996; Yoo, Donthu, 2001; Netemeyer et al., 2004; Srinivasan et al., 2005; Lehmann et al., 2008). Others works studied specific critical brand equity drivers, such as brand experience (Payne et al., 2009; Brakus et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2011), brand trust (Chaudhuri, Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003; Herbst et al., 2012) and/or brand attachment (Thomson et al., 2005; Park et al. 2010; Belaid, Behi, 2011). In particular, Park et al. (2010) studied brand attachment as “the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self”, based on two factors: brand–self connection and brand prominence. In post-modern consumption, in fact, the consumers often choice brands to represent self-images and to explicate these images to others and/or to themselves (Escalas, Bettman, 2003; Moore, Homer, 2008; Cheng, White, Chaplin, 2012; Ferraro, Kirmani, Matherly, 2013). Coherently, in the paper we analyze the impact of brand experience (BE) and brand trust (BT) on brand-self connection (BSC), as critical dimension of sustainable consumer-brand relationship (CBR). More in depth, the aims of the paper are the following: 1. to measure the strength of the relationships among these brand equity drivers; 2. to demonstrate the predictive capacity of brand trust and brand experience related to brand-self connection; 3. to evaluate the different intensity of these relationships among different analyzed product categories. The paper is structured as follows: first, there is a literature review on consumer-brand relationships and brand equity drivers; second, we present key findings of the empirical study, confirming/disconfirming six research hypotheses; third, we put in evidence the managerial implications, limits and future research opportunities of the work.

2. Literature review

2.1 Brand-self connection as critical dimension of consumer-brand relationship

Many academics analyzed the concept of consumer-brand relationship to evaluate the brand’s sustainable competitive advantage (Fournier, Yao, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Aggarwal, 2004; Aaker et al., 2004; Hayers et al., 2006; Nyffenegger et a., 2010). Particularly, Fournier (1998) defined the concept of brand relationship quality (BRQ) as “customer-based indicator of the strength and depth of the person-brand relationship”. As underlined by the Author, BRQ is related in depth to consumer feelings and behaviours (Fournier, 1998). In a consequent 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”. Coherently, Aggarwal (2004) highlighted the effects of brand relationship norms – exchange or communal – on consumer attitudes and behaviours, analyzing the role of social context on the business responses. Adopting an attachment perspective

(Mikulincer, Shaver, 2007), in the last years Park et al. (2010) studied in depth brand attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, Park, 2005) as “the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self”, based on two factors: brand–self connection and brand prominence. In particular, the Authors developed a measuring scale about the brand–self connection (BSC), the aspect of attachment that involves the cognitive and emotional connection between the consumer and the brand. According to Fournier (1998), self-concept connection refers to the degree to which the brand expresses the important elements of the consumer’s self-identity, values and goals (Hwang, Kandampully, 2012). Building strong, favourable and unique brand associations (Keller, 1993, 2003), firms affect consumers’ choice that adopt the brand to communicate consumer’s values to others (Escalas, 2004). In particular, the creation of a meaningful brand–self connection is important to manage brand for which occur that “consumer's personal experience with the brand is closely tied to the image of the brand, and when the brand itself satisfies an identified psychological need” (More, Homer, 2008). Several studies underlined that brand relationships are highly connected to the consumer's self-concept, as symbolic representation of how the consumers believe they are or want to be (Fournier, 1998; Escalas, Bettman, 2003; Escalas, 2004; Chaplin, John, 2005). In the last years, the determinants of consumer-brand relationships (CBR) have been studied to identify the strength of rational / emotional components (Hwang, Kandampully, 2012) and the antecedents of CBR (Belaid, Behi, 2010; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, Sen, 2012) analyzing comparatively several product categories (Papista, Dimitriadis, 2012; Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes, Vogel, 2012). In our work, the finding of these studies allowed to identify brand trust and brand experience as potential antecedent of CBR.

2.2 Analyzing brand trust and brand experience as “relational brand equity drivers”

In the last ten years, several marketing researchers studied brand equity drivers adopting different viewpoints, in each of which may be intrinsically recognized a relational approach (brand relationship: Esch et al., 2006). In some recent works on Journal of Consumer Psychology (Special Issue in “Brand as Intentional Agent Framework - BIAF”, 2012), Kervyn, Fiske and Molene (2012) proposed the BIAF as model that “integrates two relational dimensions (intentions and ability) and the three aspects of brand perception, from evaluative dimensions to emotional reaction to behaviour”. Coherently, Fournier and Alvarez (2012) underlined that the BIAF considers characteristics of the brand in terms of intentions (warmth) and ability (competence) as a brand relationship co-created by consumer and firms. In the present work, according to Belaid, Behi (2010) and Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, Sen (2012), we analyze the role of two relational brand equity drivers to sustain brand-self connection: brand experience and brand trust¹.

In particular, adopting an experiential perspective (Pine, Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999, 2003; Payne et al., 2009), Brakus, Schmitt, Zarantonello (2009) defined 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”. These Authors (Zarantonello et al., 2007; Brakus et al., 2009) validated a brand experience scale for measuring the consumer responses, based on four sub-dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural. Analyzing brand experience as antecedent of CBR, Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar and Sen (2012) verified the predictive role of

¹ Some empirical studies (e.g. Brakus, Schmitt, Zarantonello, 2009; Iglesias, Singh, Batista-Foguet, 2011) demonstrated the strong relationship between brand experience, brand trust and/or brand commitment: coherently, we have defined the hypothesis H1(see paragraph 3.).

memorable brand experiences and consumer-brand identification: coherently, in the empirical research we have defined the hypothesis H2 that evaluate this relationship (see following section).

Instead, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) examined brand trust as element of brand commitment, defined as “the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function”. Subsequently, Delgado-Ballester in her studies (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003; Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Delgado-Ballester, Manuera-Alemàn, 2005) considered brand trust as key relation market-based asset, identifying a brand trust scale based on two main sub-dimensions: a. brand reliability, that has a technical or competence-based nature, involving the ability and willingness to keep promises and satisfy consumers’ needs; b. brand intentions, that comprises the attribution of good intentions to the brand in relation to the consumers’ interests and welfare (Delgado-Ballester, Manuera-Alemàn, 2005). In the Belaid and Behi’s study (2010), the authors underlined the high correlation between brand attachment (and relative sub-dimension, such as brand-self connection) and brand trust: coherently, in the empirical research we have defined the hypothesis H3 for verifying this relationship (see following section).

According to several works about brand equity research (Yoo, Donthu, 2001; Oliveira-Castro et al., 2008; Moradi, Zerei, 2011), moreover, in the empirical study we analyse comparatively consumer-brand relationship about different product categories (Belaid, Behi, 2010; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, Sen, 2012; Hwang, Kandampully, 2012). So, we hypothesized different levels of involvement in the consumer-brand relationships for speciality goods - product categories characterized by high involvement in buying processes and high unitary value - rather than shopping goods (see hypotheses H4-H5-H6 described in the following section).

3. Methodology and hypotheses

According to aforesaid theoretical studies, in the paper we defined an empirical framework (Figure 1) to analyze the importance of brand experience (BE) and brand trust (BT) for building brand-self connection (BSC), as critical dimension of sustainable consumer-brand relationship².

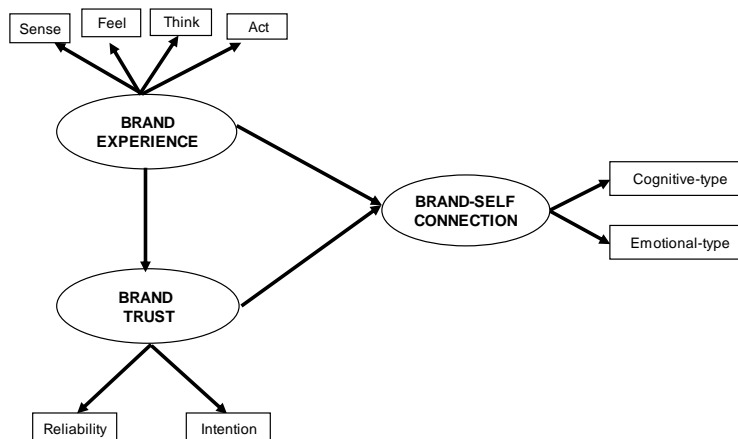


Figure 1 – The research framework.

² To measure BE, we adopt a shorten version of the brand experience scale based on twelve items (Zarantonello, Schmitt, Brakus, 2007). To measure BT, we adopt a brand trust scale based on eight items (Delgado-Ballester, 2004). To measure BSC, we adopt a scale based on two items (Park et al., 2010).

As noted above, the key aims of the paper are: 1. to measure the strength of the relationships among these brand equity drivers; 2. to demonstrate the predictive capacity of brand trust and brand experience related to brand-self connection; 3. to evaluate the different intensity of these relationships among different analyzed product categories.

With a team of experts in a preliminary phase of our research, we have selected four product categories - speciality (2) and shopping (2) goods - characterized by high intensity of emotional attachment in young-adult consumers' mind (19-34 years): Scooters, Luxury Watches, Smartphones, Sport Shoes. In a successive phase, a questionnaire with closed and open ended answers has been submitted to a consumers' sample. The sample (n=600) was stratified with two variables representative of Province of Naples: the class of age (19-24, 25-29, 30-34) and the gender (male and female). An analysis of the respondents' profile is reported in Table 1, where it is shown that 30% were aged 19-24, 49% were aged 25-29 and 19% were aged 30-34. The distribution of the gender shows a higher percentage of males (61.8%) compared to the females (38.2%). For questions with closed answers was asked to young-adult consumers to evaluate their relationships with brands, on the base of a five-point Likert scale (1 = "extremely disagree," and 5 = "extremely agree"). We have prepared four different versions of the questionnaire.

	19-24	25-29	30-34	Total
Male	20,7	27,0	14,0	61,8
Female	10,0	22,7	5,5	38,2
Total	30,7	49,7	19,5	100,0

Table 1 - Sample Description.

For the empirical research was adopted the PLS (Partial Least Squares) approach to structural equation models, known as PLS Path Modelling (PLSPM) (Tenenhaus et al., 2005). This is a component-based estimation technique that provides an estimate of the latent variables in such a way that they are the most correlated to each other and the most representative of each corresponding block of manifest variables. The PLSPM is a more data-oriented method where the focus is on fixed observed individuals and the estimation procedure aims to optimize the prediction of the factor scores.

Structural equation modelling was adopted to test the research framework and to verify the six hypotheses:

H1 – Brand experience (BE) is positively related to Brand trust (BT).

H2 – Brand experience (BE) is positively related to Brand-self connection (BSC).

H3 – Brand trust (BT) is positively related to Brand-self connection (BSC).

H4 – Brand experience (BE) affects Brand trust (BT) differently in the various product categories.

H5 – Brand experience (BE) affects Brand-self connection (BSC) differently in the various product categories.

H6 – Brand experience (BT) affects Brand-self connection (BSC) differently in the various product categories.

4. Findings

The path model used in the study (see Figure 1) is a complex model as it combines constructs of different order. Both the antecedents of BSC are second order constructs measured by the respective sub-scales, while BSC is a first order construct measured by its own indicators. In order to handle such complexity, each second order construct (BE and BT) is estimated separately using the hierarchical components model (Wold, 1982). In this type of model a second order construct is estimated by using

both the different first order constructs (sub-scales), each one measured by the corresponding indicators, and the whole set of indicators. Figure 2 shows the path model used for estimating the BE construct. The same structural model has been used for the BT construct. The hierarchical structure allows to take into account the impact of each sub-scale behind the second order construct.

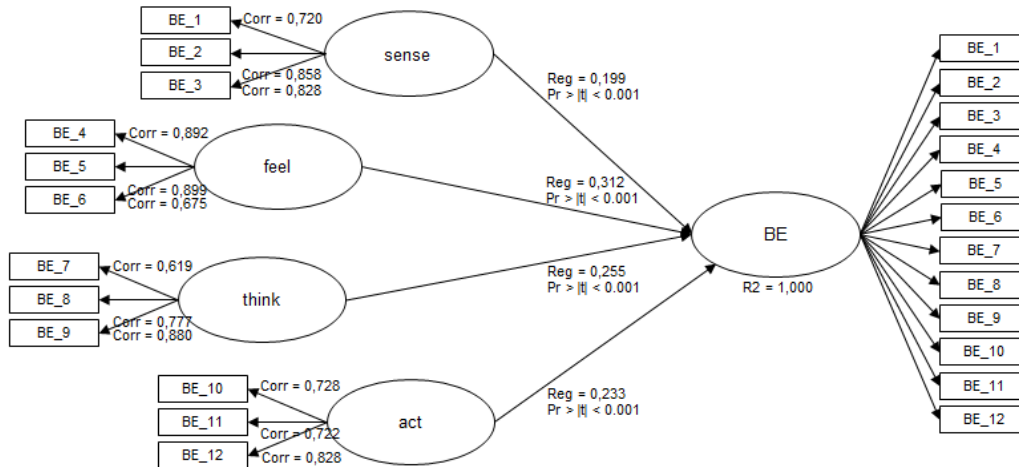


Figure 2 – Hierarchical PLS-path model for estimating the BE second order construct.

Figure 2 shows how the “feel” sub-scale has the strongest impact on the BE with a path coefficient equal to 0.312 followed by “think” (0.255), “act” (0.233) and “sense” (0.199). All these relations are statistically significant as shown by the p-values on the arrows linking the sub-scales to the BE construct (p-value<0.001 for each sub-scale). The R² of the model is equal to 1 as shown below the BE construct, since by construction all the information is used to estimate BE, i.e. all indicators together. We have evaluated the construct reliability by using the Dillon-Goldstein’s rho index and obtaining satisfactory results for each sub-scale (sense=0.847, feel=0.875, think=0.819, act=0.814). We got a satisfactory construct reliability also in the other path model used for estimating the BT construct (reliability=0.901, intentions=0.841).

The latent scores representing the first order constructs subsequently become the observed variables measuring respectively the BE and the BT construct in the research framework diagrammatically represented in Figure 1. However, running a unique global model for the entire consumers’ sample does not allow for the consideration of differences in consumer behaviours, whereas as stated in the theoretical framework it is reasonable to expect that consumers show different actions with respect to different product categories. At this aim the modelling strategy adopted for this study is splitted into two main steps. First a global model is estimated on the whole sample to test the main hypotheses (H1-H3). Then the consumers are assigned to four different groups according to the product categories and local models are estimated and compared in terms of structural coefficients and goodness-of-fit indexes thus testing the remaining hypotheses (H4-H6).

4.1 Estimate and assessment of the global model

In the following, the results of the global model testing hypotheses H1-H3 will be presented. This includes results for both the measurement (outer) and the structural (inner) model.

Measurement Model. Indicator reliability is assessed by looking at the standardized loadings³ in Table 2, where it is shown that all indicators are highly correlated with the respective constructs and statistically significant (significance is evaluated by bootstrap confidence intervals). To assess the construct reliability, we calculate the composite reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) indexes. As we show in Table 2, both the CR and the AVE values of all constructs are above the cut-off value of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively. That means in the first case that constructs are homogenous and in the second case that they capture on average a 57%, 76% and 78% of the variance of their indicators in relation to the amount of variance due to measurement error. Coherently with the AVE the BSC construct present the highest loadings (BSC1=0.869, BSC2= 0.903).

Construct	Item	Standardized loadings	Lower bound (95%)	Upper bound (95%)	CR	AVE
BE	BE1	0.625	0.555	0.711	0.849	0.570
	BE2	0.910	0.886	0.925		
	BE3	0.782	0.723	0.824		
	BE4	0.672	0.582	0.730		
BT	BT1	0.862	0.825	0.894	0.869	0.767
	BT2	0.889	0.856	0.914		
BSC	BSC1	0.869	0.830	0.899	0.880	0.785
	BSC2	0.903	0.879	0.919		

Table 2 – Indicator and Construct reliability.

The discriminant validity for both the items and the constructs have been tested by checking that each item is higher correlated with its respective construct and that each construct is highest correlated with its own items. The results confirming a satisfactory discriminant validity for all items and constructs are shown in Table 3.

	BE	BT	BSC
BE1	0.625	0.404	0.332
BE2	0.910	0.363	0.516
BE3	0.782	0.314	0.380
BE4	0.672	0.175	0.365
BT1	0.363	0.862	0.455
BT2	0.365	0.889	0.408
BSC1	0.406	0.459	0.869
BSC2	0.539	0.416	0.903

Table 3 – Cross-loadings.

Casual model (structural). The analysis of the structural model allows measuring the predictive power of the independent variables by analysing the paths. These are shown in Table 4 together with the percentile estimate of 95% bootstrap confidence interval and the R².

³ The standardized loadings measures the correlation between the manifest variables and the related latent variable.

Causal relations	Hypothesis	Result	Path	Lower bound 95%	Upper bound 95%	R2
BE -> BT	H1 (+)	accepted	0.38	0.31	0.46	0.17
BE -> BSC	H2 (+)	accepted	0.57	0.47	0.69	0.38
BT -> BSC	H3 (+)	accepted	0.49	0.39	0.60	

Table 4 – PLS results for the structural model.

Focusing attention on the relation between BE and BT we find a significant impact of BE on BT. Looking at the relations among BSC and its determinants we also find significant positive impacts of BE and BT on BSC. *These findings confirm hypotheses H1-H2-H3.* The explanatory power measured by the R^2 shows that only 17% of the variation in BT is explained by BE, while a higher percentage of BSC variability (38%) is accounted for by the BE and BT predictors.

4.2 Comparative analysis and findings discussion among product categories

The comparison among product categories requires estimating as many path models as the number of categories. Once assessed each one of the measurement model (results are not shown because limited space available), the analysis of differences across product categories is based on the comparison among the casual relations.

Path coefficient (BE -> BT):	Difference	p-value	Significant
smartphones vs sport shoes	0.415	0.010	Yes
smartphones vs luxury watches	0.021	0.812	No
smartphones vs scooters	0.192	0.040	Yes
sport shoes vs luxury watches	0.394	0.010	Yes
sport shoes vs scooters	0.223	0.079	No
luxury watches vs scooters	0.171	0.059	No

Path coefficient (BE -> BSC):	Difference	p-value	Significant
smartphones vs sport shoes	0.157	0.297	No
smartphones vs luxury watches	0.230	0.089	No
smartphones vs scooters	0.207	0.158	No
sport shoes vs luxury watches	0.073	0.683	No
sport shoes vs scooters	0.364	0.020	Yes
luxury watches vs scooters	0.437	0.020	Yes

Path coefficient (BT -> BSC):	Difference	p-value	Significant
smartphones vs sport shoes	0.260	0.020	Yes
smartphones vs luxury watches	0.022	0.911	No
smartphones vs scooters	0.546	0.010	Yes
sport shoes vs luxury watches	0.281	0.020	Yes
sport shoes vs scooters	0.286	0.059	No
luxury watches vs scooters	0.567	0.010	Yes

Table 5 - Results of the multigroup permutation test.

The significance of path differences is evaluated by a *permutation test* procedure (Chin and Dibbern, 2010), where the hypotheses to be tested are: H0: parameters are not significantly different; Ha: parameters are significantly different. Results of this comparison are shown in Table 5, where significant differences among the paths at the 0.05 level are indicated on the fourth column (the second column includes the difference in path coefficients between groups, the third column the p-values of the permutation test). Results show a significant difference between the groups for all three path coefficients, thus *confirming hypotheses H4-H5-H6*. For instance the impact of BE on BT for smartphones is significantly different from the one for sport shoes. The relation between BE and BSC present less differences among groups. In fact there are differences only between sport shoes and scooters and between luxury watches and scooters. Instead, the relation between BT and BSC present several differences among groups. For further analysis of differences among groups results from the single PLS path models for each product category are reported in Table 6, where all relations are significant at the 0.05 level.

Relation		Global	Smartphones	Sport Shoes	Luxury Watches	Scooters
BE -> BT	path	0.38	0.29	0.70	0.31	0.49
	R ²	0.17	0.12	0.35	0.10	0.37
BE -> BSC	path	0.57	0.47	0.63	0.70	0.27
BT -> BSC	path	0.49	0.35	0.61	0.33	0.90
	R ²	0.38	0.31	0.42	0.43	0.40
Number of units		600	150	150	150	150
GOF		0.43	0.37	0.50	0.43	0.53

Table 6 - PLS results for structural model for each product category.

From the path that links BE with BT, we found a greater effect when considering the models for sport shoes (0.70) and scooters (0.49) than the global model (0.38) and the lower effect when considering luxury watches (0.31) and smartphones (0.29). When considering the relation between BSC and its drivers, we found that BE has a higher effect in the model for luxury watches (0.70) and sport shoes (0.63) than the global model (0.57) while BT present the higher effect for scooters (0.90) and sport shoes (0.61) than the global model (0.49). In all models, BE has a higher impact on BSC than BT, except the model for scooter where BT plays the prominent role.

Note that if we consider as a global criterion of goodness-of-fit the GOF index (Amato et al., 2004), we see that it improves for three of the product categories. This result together with results from the multigroup test and the analysis of each single relation highlights the importance of considering specific models for each category in order to have more specific information.

5. Managerial implications

The empirical findings put in evidence the role of brand experience and brand trust on brand-self connection. As hypothesized, these brand equity drivers have a predictive capability to influence consumer-brand relationships. In the comparative study, in particular, we have illustrated that brand experience has higher impact on brand-self connection for luxury watches, instead brand trust has higher impact for scooters. In the case of sport shoes, moreover, both brand trust than brand experience

drive a strong impact on brand-self connection. For smartphone category, instead, we have verified the lowest values of the relationships among brand equity drivers. Moreover, the comparative analysis between product categories showed that the global model is more compatible for sport shoes (analysis of GOF values). In particular for this product category, the empirical study allows us to evaluate that in the consumer-brand relationships management there is a greater predictive capacity played by brand experience and trust.

These findings demonstrate that strategic brand management must be defined through different marketing tools in different product categories. This assumption has an important implication for marketing managers that could sustain profitable consumer-brand relationships to maximize brand loyalty and, subsequently, customer life time values. In particular, managing brand with high intensity of usage (e.g. scooter), we have verified a critical role of brand trust in consumer-brand relationships (Belaid, Behi, 2010). Instead, for brand with high emotional connection (e.g. luxury watch), to sustain brand's competitive advantage it is important to manage the experience providers (Schmitt, 2003) to co-create value for and with the customers. Although in different ways, both for specialty goods that for shopping goods (in particular sport shoes), the findings showed the predictive role of the brand value drivers on brand-self connection.

6. Limitations and future research opportunities

The structural equation model have allowed to evaluate comparatively the distinctive impact of brand trust and brand experience in consumer-brand relationships management, focusing in depth on brand-self connection as proxy of attachment that involves the cognitive and emotional connection between the consumer and the brand. Our study makes an empirical contribution on this brand topic.

However, this paper has some limits that allows to defining several opportunities for future researches. First, in the empirical study the sampling procedure was not probabilistic. The sample was defined in a specific geographic area (Province of Naples) and just for class of age (20-34 years). To support the findings, we could define a future stage of study: a. on a probabilistic sample in the same geographical area; b. on a convenience sample in other European context comparable with Naples. Second, selection process of the two antecedents of consumer-brand relationship was a first step in our research project. Future empirical study should also examine the role of other relational brand constructs, such as brand commitment and/or brand engagement. Third, the analysis of CBR was based only through two items (cognitive-type and emotional-type) that described brand-self connection, *proxy* of consumer's mind. In the future, we would like conduct a new step of the research that examine the role of reference groups in consumer-brand relationship, studying the intensity of individualism/collectivism dimension in consumer's cultural values. Finally, we would like to profile other researches using also qualitative analysis methods (focus group, projective technique, storytelling, ZMET, etc.) for studying in depth key determinants of consumer-brand relationships.

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