

Increasing customer brand loyalty: Proposition of an integrative metamodel

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Abstract

A lot of research was conducted to better understand Customer Brand Loyalty (CBL) leading to the identification of different antecedents and theories to explain it. Given this diversity of causes, several authors suggested the necessity to develop a general theory of CBL, with integrative metamodels. These metamodels are crucial in research, since they give a clear and common basis of knowledge of an extensively studied subject. However, the ones proposed so far suffer from a lack of representativity of the studied antecedents for CBL. By analyzing 185 articles, we identified 252 different variables to explain CBL, and important ones are missing in existing metamodels. This lack of representativity is a significant gap in the literature on CBL. This study fills this gap with a rigorous literature review, allowing to integrate the diversity of variables to the existing frameworks by creating categories of concepts. We propose a meta-model with 9 core concepts, 4 main categories and a process of CBL development which is giving a clear template for managers but also a common basis of understanding on the structuration of the explanatory variables for CBL in the literature.

Keywords

Customer brand loyalty, Systematic review, Grounded Theory Literature Review, Brand loyalty antecedents, Metamodel

1. Introduction

The significance of Customer Brand Loyalty (CBL) as a crucial topic for companies profitability has been acknowledged and studied extensively in the literature (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). These researches resulted in the discovery of a diversity of antecedents and theories to explain CBL so that some authors emphasized the necessity to gather the existing theories into an integrative and general theory with a metamodel of CBL (Dick & Basu, 1994; Frisou, 1998; Lichtlé & Plichon, 2008). Meta-models are essential in research to give a clear, more robust and common basis of knowledge of an extensively studied subject and facilitate the understanding of a complex phenomenon like CBL.

Some authors already proposed metamodels of CBL but we could observe an important gap in these propositions, which is the lack of representativity of the diversity of concepts used to explain CBL in the past literature. By analyzing 185 peer-reviewed articles, we could identify 252 different explanatory variables for CBL and found out that important concepts were missing in the existing metamodels, like all the variables related to brand associations for example (brand image, brand identity). In all the existing metamodels, the process of antecedents' selection is not clear and rigorous, leading to the omission of important antecedents that were previously studied. This is an important gap in the development of a general theory. There is then a need to review the existing theories and concepts, to propose a metamodel that is truly representative of what was demonstrated. We will then conduct a systematic literature review, to identify the main categories of concepts and main theories to propose an integrative model of CBL formation.

This literature review will result in a metamodel that helps mastering the diversity of possible causes for CBL by identifying 9 core concepts and their peripheral concepts and by creating 4 main categories of concepts representing the main levers to increase CBL, namely *brand associations*, *brand experience*, *brand relationship* and *brand offer*. In our metamodel, these categories and core concepts are interconnected to existing theoretical frameworks to give a richer and more robust general theory of CBL. Moreover, our final metamodel will be defined as a process of antecedents where *brand associations* and *brand offer* elements are the root causes, providing a nurturing ground for the development and success of *brand experience* and *brand relationships* strategies. This process of marketing levers will help researchers to structure their next research and marketers to prioritize their strategies with a clear guide to follow.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. A diversity of definitions for CBL

Customer brand loyalty (CBL) is a crucial asset for a brand and a great interest for companies. When we see textbook cases like Apple loyal consumers, waiting days and nights in front of Apple stores to have the last iPhone, we understand how CBL is truly fascinating for companies, and why a lot of research was dedicated to better understand this concept. In the literature, CBL was defined by two main streams, either with a stochastic approach (Tucker, 1964) based on the behavior or with a determinist approach (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978) based on the attitude. In the stochastic approach, only the behavior is considered to define CBL, as the action of re-buying the same brand. Whereas, in the determinist approach, we consider several explanatory factors through the observation of psychologic commitment and customers' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. Now it is admitted that it is better to use the two approaches by adopting a multidimensional approach, considering on the same time the behavior and the attitude of the consumer, and defining CBL as an actual buying behavior repeated over time and which is a function of customer psychologic process.

2.2. A diversity of causes to explain CBL

According to Lichtlé and Plichon (2008) four main theoretical frameworks exist to explain loyalty. First, it was defined as the result of a reinforcement. Just like the classic *Pavlovian conditioning* (Hilgard & Marquis, 1940), consumers are exposed to stimuli, leading to positive or negative responses. If the response is positive, like in a satisfaction state, the consumer is more likely to repeat the same behavior and develop CBL. The second framework is the *Theory of reasoned action* (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) in which individuals are seen as rational and use available information to make decisions. CBL is then based on rational and cognitive elements. The third main theory is to conceive loyalty as the result of a commitment. According to the *Psychology of commitment* (Joule & Beauvois, 1989), individuals tend to stick to their decisions, which explains the formation of CBL. Finally, the last main theory used is the *effect of dependency* (Lichtlé & Plichon, 2008). Contextual elements can constitute barriers to change like perceived switching costs, perceived risks, interpersonal relationships or the lack of attractive competitors.

For Lichtlé and Plichon (2008), these theoretical frameworks used to explain loyalty are not in competition and should be integrated within a metamodel to have a better view and understanding on loyalty formation and open new avenues of thought. This will to integrate the causes of CBL in a single model is not new, since several authors have proposed integrative models (Dick and Basu 1994; Frisou 1998; Lichtlé and Plichon 2008...). In the case of Lichtlé and Plichon (2008), they suggested an integration of the existing theories, by combining two main aspects, also defined by Frisou (1998): the transactional and relational components of loyalty. With this integrative framework, the main theories developed in the literature are gathered, however the diversity of the studied antecedents in the literature is not captured. Indeed, with an analysis of 185 articles studying CBL antecedents we could identify more than 200 different antecedents to explain loyalty. In the model of Frisou (1998) or Lichtlé and Plichon (2008), only 3 main explanatory variables are mobilized that are, satisfaction for the transactional process, trust and commitment for the relational process. These integrative models neglected to integrate important concepts, widely studied, like all the variables related to brand associations for example (brand image, brand identity). Likewise, the other metamodels (Dick & Basu, 1994) or reviews (Pan, Sheng, & Xie, 2012; Wu & Anridho, 2016; ...) are only focusing on some arbitrarily selected variables taken from this wide literature. Indeed, the process of antecedents' selection is not explicit, and these attempts to integrate past research do not sufficiently represent the diversity of the studied antecedents. This lack of representativity of existing models is then an important gap in the literature on CBL general theory. To help the building of this general theory, it is essential to fill this gap by integrating this diversity of explanatory variables, in a new proposition.

3. Research statement and objectives

Since the 90s' some authors have emphasized the need to build a general theory of CBL and made propositions of metamodels that do not reflect what has been shown in the literature. More recently, Watson, Beck, Henderson, & Palmatier (2015), claimed that the limited returns of loyalty building efforts were related to a heterogeneity and divergence in the theoretical approaches for CBL. For this reason, they also proposed a framework with the main antecedents and outcomes of CBL. However, despite this will to map clearly the existing theoretical approaches, they selected four antecedents to explain CBL (commitment, trust, satisfaction and loyalty incentives) without precisising why they selected these antecedents and why they omit other key concepts of importance, extensively studied. This issue of identifying the main predictors of CBL has also been raised in 2019, in the meta-analysis of Khamitov, Wang, & Thomson, but their study only focused on customer relationship aspects, leading again to the omission of important concepts necessary to produce a general theory of CBL. This lack of

representativity is an important gap that must be filled to work on the development of a general theory of CBL. Moreover, as stated by Lichtlé and Plichon (2008), it is urgent and necessary to build a metamodel in which professionals could find their interest. Companies seek at developing tools to increase CBL, but most of the implemented programs have limited effects (Dorotic, Bijmolt, and Verhoef, 2012; Meyer-Waarden and Benavent, 2006). To propose a new integrative metamodel of CBL, it then crucial to follow the question raised by Lichtlé and Plichon (2008) : “*which levers should be used? [...]*” (p.137, 2008). We seek to identify the main levers useful for companies to increase CBL, by identifying the different explanatory variables of CBL in the literature, and by relating them to existing theories. Given the diversity of concepts used to explain loyalty, a classification should be conducted to give better comparison and integration of past results. Classifications are important research tools as they help to classify, describe and explain diversity and complex information, and they are relevant to help defining managerial recommendations (Hunt, 1996; Speed, 1993). It is a relevant approach to identify marketing levers to increase CBL.

The aim of this article is to build a much awaited metamodel by proposing a new classification through the conduct of a literature review on CBL antecedents. This will fill the gap in the literature seeking at understanding CBL formation and as requested by Lichtlé and Plichon (2008), help highlighting the main levers to increase CBL, by answering the following research question: “*In the light of existing theoretical explanations, how can we identify and integrate practical action levers into a metamodel to increase CBL?*”

4. Methodology and method used

4.1. Chosen methodology: A Systematic Literature Review

According to Webster & Watson (2002), when authors are facing a mature subject, with an accumulation of studies, it is relevant to conduct a literature review to suggest a conceptual framework synthesizing and explaining the research. There are two main types of reviews: the narratives reviews that seek to give an overview and a description of a topic and the Systematic Literature Reviews (SLR) that are looking at the literature in a more systematic and rigorous way (Sobrido Prieto & Rumbo-Prieto, 2018). Here we used the SLR which is a standardized methodology enabling to conduct transparent, and rigorous literature reviews (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015) by using an explicit and replicable method (Atkinson & Cipriani, 2018). This is the perfect approach to manage the existing diversity of CBL antecedents.

4.2. Chosen method: The Grounded Theory Literature Review

Depending on the type of articles used in a SLR (quantitative, qualitative or composite data), different methods exists (Gough, Thomas, & Oliver, 2012; Hong & Pluye, 2018). Since we seek at proposing the most integrative and exhaustive review, we consider all types of articles, quantitative as much as qualitative studies. Among the existing protocols available to deal with composite data (Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Jones, Young, & Sutton, 2005), one was the most appropriate to tackle our research question: *The Grounded Theory Literature Review Method (GTLRM)*, created by Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller, and Wilderom (2011). This method uses the inductive approach of the *Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), by coding the concepts from past studies as raw data to let emerge categories of concepts and propose a theoretical reflection (Bandara, Furtmueller, Gorbacheva, Miskon, & Beekhuyzen, 2015). Conducting a literature review and using the *Grounded Theory* to create theories seem to be two opposed approaches since the very principle of *Grounded Theory* is to make the existing theories a blank state to generate a new theory exclusively from data (Charmaz, 1996; Dunne, 2011). However, in this method, past research is seen as raw data, from which concepts are identified in the same way it is done with empirical data. This is then the perfect approach to manage the diversity of CBL explanatory variables and propose a theoretical reflection. This method is composed by

five main steps that will be followed in this study: defining, searching, selecting, analyzing and presenting.

5. Analysis and results of the protocol

5.1. Step 1 of the method: Defining

First, we must define the scope of the review, that is to identify the main action levers impacting positively CBL. Tangible elements of the brand on which the brand can have a direct impact will be selected to understand how the brand can act to foster CBL, in a B2C context.

5.2. Step 2: Searching

In this step, articles with conceptual frameworks on CBL were searched, to identify the most recurring concepts. A list of 70 keywords were generated and a sample of 10 marketing experts validated this list and proposed 19 new keywords. A total of 89 keywords were searched on three search engines: EBSCO, Google Scholar and Web of Sciences.

5.3. Step 3: Selecting

After analyzing 36,332 search results, 245 articles were selected by removing repetitive results and checking the relevance of the titles and abstracts. After looking at the bibliographies we obtained a total of 341 articles. Since the objective of this research is to highlight the main antecedents of CBL, it was preferable however to constrain the analysis to articles of higher quality. We then kept 185 articles, coming from ranked journals in one of these three rankings: The Journal Citations Reports, the CNRS and the FNEGE ranking.

5.4. Step 4: Analyzing

Here we used the three recommended types of coding coming from the *Grounded Theory* (Corbin & Strauss, 1990): *open coding*, *axial coding*, and *selective coding*.

5.4.1. Open coding.

First, relevant concepts for the research question are identified in our 185 articles (Wolfswinkel et al., 2011). A total of 252 antecedents are reported.

5.4.2. Axial coding.

The objective of this step, is to give an explanatory power by gathering the identified concepts in more abstract categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Six main categories were created to classify the 252 identified antecedents, with variables related to **the environment** (Switching costs, Perceived risk, Exit barrier...), **individual characteristics** (Motivation, Culture, Knowledge...), **brand offer** (Perceived value, Service quality, Price perception...), **brand associations** (Brand identification, Self-congruence, CSR, Brand identity ...), **brand experience** (Satisfaction, Delight, Emotions...) and **brand relationship** (Trust, Attachment...). To define these categories, it was important to find similar elements between concepts but also to make sure categories were sufficiently mutually exclusive. To limit bias, this step of coding was simultaneously conducted by another researcher, resulting in basically the same main categories. After exchanges with experts on the subject, this typology of 6 categories was kept.

5.4.3. Selective coding.

The aim of this last part of coding is to select the relevant categories that should all represent the marketing action levers impacting CBL. The categories related to the environment and the individual characteristics do not represent direct marketing levers, so they won't be kept for the analysis. Brands cannot have a direct impact on consumer's culture or on their competitors for example. Four categories remain for the research question since they are composed by variables representing tangible marketing action levers for brands. For each category, a rigorous selection of the concepts was made thanks to a threshold of 10% of total frequencies within the category.

First there are the variables associated to “brand associations”, or to consumers’ perceptions and beliefs toward a brand (Camiciottoli, Ranfagni, & Guercini, 2014). Based on the selection criterion, three antecedents were selected: *Brand identification*, *Self-congruence* and *perceived Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)*. According to *Social Identity Theory*, individuals seek to develop a social identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), and brands can be used as social symbols to confirm consumers’ identity (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). This phenomenon appears through the concept of **brand identification** which is *a feeling of affiliation to a social entity, based on the perception, sensation, and evaluation of his or her membership to a given brand* (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012, p.407). **Self-congruence** is a psychological process of self-definition, instead process of self-categorization in the sight of others (Elbedweihy, Jayawardhena, Elsharnouby, & Elsharnouby, 2016). It refers to a *concordance between consumers’ self-concept (real or ideal) and the image or the personality of a given brand* (Sirgy, 1982). Consumers would prefer to consume brands reinforcing their self-concept according to the *cognitive-consistency theory*, or brands with an attractive personality to enhance their self-concept according to the *self-expansion theory* (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). With the development of new ethical consumptions, the concept of CSR was also increasingly studied. According to Aramburu & Pescador (2017), **perceived CSR** is *the combination of consumers’ perceptions regarding ethical, environmental and social initiatives of the brand*. Those perceptions can impact positively CBL (Mandhachitara & Poolthong, 2011).

The second category is related to “brand experience”. The term “experience” refers to Filser's (2002) definition : “the set of positive and negative consequences the consumer reaps of the use of a good or a service” (2002, p.14). With the selection criterion we selected *Customer satisfaction* and *Delight*. According to the *Comparison Standards Paradigm*, **customer satisfaction** results from a comparison of a given performance and some standards (Fournier & Mick, 1999). Different definitions were used (Fournier and Mick 1999; Oliver 1980; Westbrook and Reilly 1983...) and Giese & Cote (2000) proposed a definitional framework, summarized in this definition: *satisfaction is an evaluative judgement, evaluated at one point in time, resulting from the comparison between the performance of a given object and a predefined standard (expectations, desires, experiences...)*. Satisfaction impacts positively CBL (Curtis, Abratt, & Rhoades, 2011; Oliver, 1999; Trinquocoste, 1996) but this relationship is not linear (Oliva, Oliver, Macmillan, & Macmillan, 1992) and satisfaction is not always enough (Jones & Sasser, 1995). Thus, a different concept based on the *Theory of Emotions* (Plutchik & Kellerman, 1980) was increasingly studied :customer delight which is *a positive emotional state of joy generated by exceeding expectations with surprise* (Rust & Oliver, 2000). By providing joy and surprise, brands offer an emotional experience impacting positively CBL (Schneider & Bowen, 1999).

The third category gathers the variables related to “brand relationship” as defined by Morgan & Hunt (1994), that is “all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges”. (1994, p.22). For this category, the concepts of *Trust* and *Brand attachment* met the selection threshold. **Customer brand trust** refers *simultaneously to a belief in the brand reliability and honesty* (Erciş, Ünal, Candan, & Yıldırım, 2012) *and to a will to rely on the brand over the long run* (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). If an individual trusts another one, he is more likely to develop positive behavioral intentions toward the other (Aydin & Ozer, 2005) and to resist to short-term attractions from the competition (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The concept of brand attachment, based on the **Attachment theory** (Vlachos, Theotokis, Pramataris, & Vrechopoulos, 2010), refers to *an emotional bond between a customer and a brand, based on the affection, passion and connection with the brand*

(Thomson et al., 2005 ; Tsai, 2011). A consumer is attached to a brand by developing a set of affective perceptions, leading to a psychological proximity and a CBL (Lacoeuilhe, 2000).

Finally, the fourth category gathers every component describing specific elements of the offer and two antecedents met the selection criterion: *Perceived value* and *Service quality*. The notion of **perceived value** is rooted in the *Economic Exchange Theory* (Chang & Dibb, 2013), and is defined as “the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given” (Zeithaml, 1988, p.14). It has a positive impact on CBL by increasing repurchase and positive attitude (Fang, Shao, & Wen, 2016), in the context of the *Theory of reasoned action*. According to the *Service-Dominant Logic*, it is essential to provide a qualitative service to make a customer loyal, whatever the industry is (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Service quality is a *global evaluation or an attitude regarding the superiority of a service delivered by a brand, formed by 5 main dimensions: tangible aspects, reliability, reactivity, assurance and empathy* (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988)

Now that the analysis is completed, let’s present our general theory emerging from it.

5.5. Step 5: Presenting

First, with this analysis we could manage the diversity of antecedents to explain CBL by highlighting core concepts and their peripheral concepts. A big part of this diversity comes from the use of different concepts that are actually closely related and describe a similar phenomenon. For example, we could identify “brand identification” as a core concept for the phenomenon of identity perceptions, with 13 peripheral concepts that are closely related. This logic is the same for the 9 antecedents selected in our analysis. (*Appendix 1*)

The management of this diversity of concepts to explain CBL, was also achieved by a proposition of 4 main categories: brand experience, brand associations, brand relationship and brand offer. This categorization gives the opportunity to build a meta-model reconciling the diversity of explanatory variables in the literature and the main theoretical frameworks used that are explanatory supports for the impact of the 4 different categories on CBL.

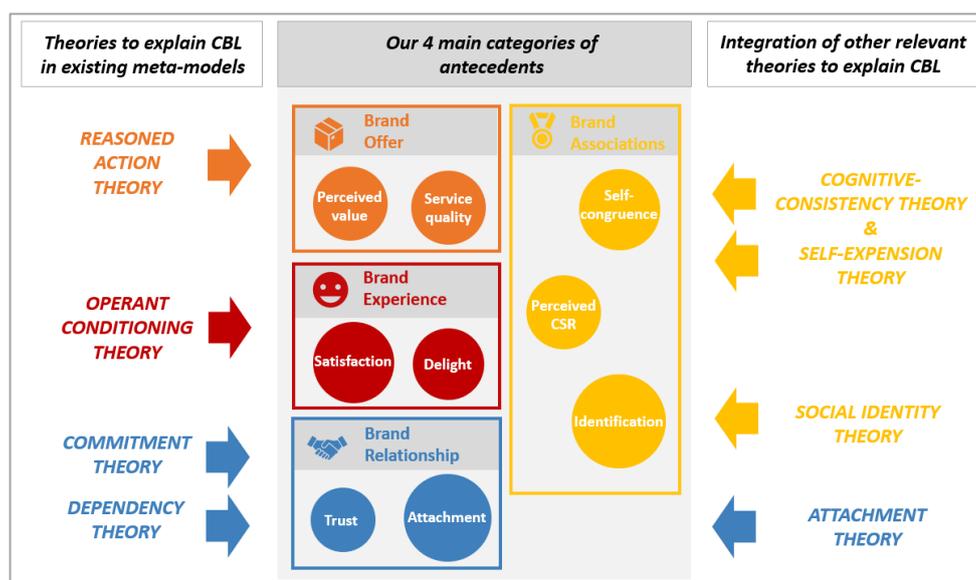


Figure 1 - Integrative metamodel of CBL

However, these theories weren’t enough to explain the impacts of the 4 categories, confirming the theoretical gap in the existing attempts in forming a general theory of CBL. The positive

impact of brand relationship can also be explained by the theory of attachment, with the concept of brand attachment. Moreover, we could observe that variables related to brand associations were missing in existing meta-models, so we brought other theories to explain CBL in our metamodel: the social identity theory, the cognitive consistency or the self-expansion theory. According to social identity theory, consumers are led to buy brands to express their identity to others, thus explaining the positive impact of brand identification on CBL. Theories of cognitive consistency and self-expansion are theoretical supports to explain the positive impact of self-congruence on CBL, as the consumer will prefer to buy brands allowing him either to reinforce or enhance his self-concept.

Last but not least, we identified some relationships between these nine variables which are also impacting each other's. In the 185 selected articles, we selected the most frequent relationships. Our threshold was the minimum amount of available studies for direct relationships between selected antecedents and CBL, that is three studies for the relationship Delight – CBL. A total of 15 relationships studied more than three times in our articles base, was selected. This conceptual framework (*Appendix 2*) allows to better understand the mechanisms behind loyalty formation, by showing what are the main interactions between the causes of CBL. This underscoring of the interactions between the antecedents, provided new insights to understand the process of CBL formation, especially since a general pattern is emerging from this model. We can see that *brand associations* levers and *brand offer* levers are consistently studied as antecedents of *brand experience* and *brand relationship* levers. *Brand associations* and *brand offer* elements are then necessary and **fundamental conditions** whereas *brand experience* and *brand relationships* are **additional conditions** to build a *True CBL*.

This observation lead to the proposition of a process of antecedents, where *brand associations* and *brand offer* elements are the root causes, providing a nurturing ground for the development and success of *brand experience* and *brand relationships* strategies.

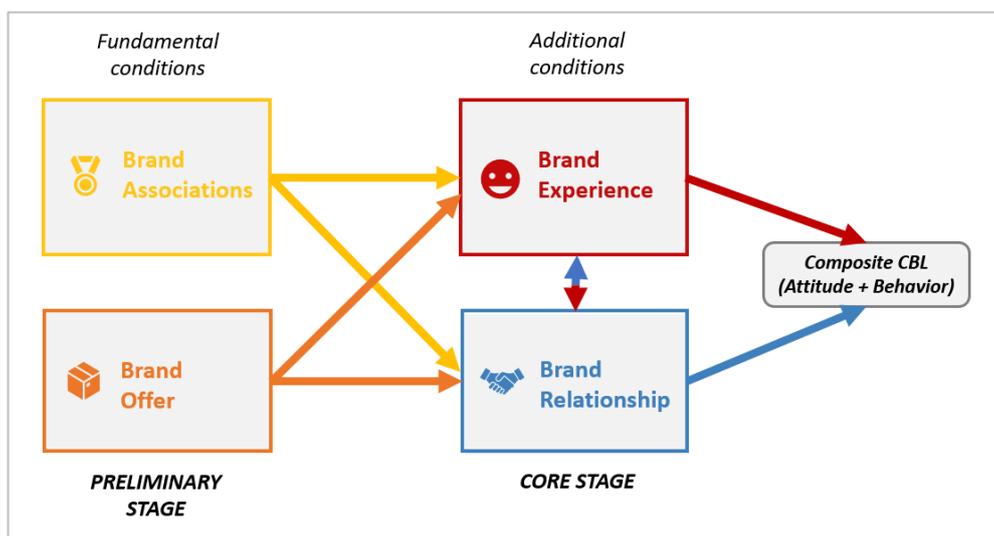


Figure 2 - Integrative process of CBL

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical implications

Thanks to this study, we could propose an integrative metamodel, going further than what was done previously by analyzing more than 200 different concepts used in the literature to let emerge categories of concepts, that helps mastering the diversity of possible antecedents for CBL. By interconnecting those concepts and categories to the existing theoretical frameworks

to explain loyalty, we could propose a real integrative model avoiding omitting certain aspects of studied CBL causes. So far, the existing meta-models weren't considering the diversity of variables used in the past, and it was an important limit and gap in these attempts to propose a general theory. This new general theory is giving several advantages for future research. First, the diversity of explanatory variables was managed by identifying core concepts and peripheral concepts. To study a certain aspect of CBL formation, researchers can now identify the main important concepts to specify their variables of interest in their future research. Moreover, this diversity is also managed by the creation of four categories of concepts which is giving a common basis and a structuration of knowledge. Given the general patterns emerging from the studied relationships, this metamodel can be described as a process with phases, where brand associations and brand offer categories are generally studied in a preliminary stage and brand experience and brand relationship in a core stage. This process is a relevant observation that will help researchers in the way they will build future models to explain CBL.

6.2. Managerial implications

This study is also very relevant for managers who need clear frameworks to help their decision-making. With these four dimensions of CBL antecedents, managers will be able to prioritize their strategies in order to improve their loyalty policies. One main managerial implication is suggesting to brands to work on the four dimensions by selecting at least one objective for each dimension and working toward these objectives. Moreover, the process emerging from this meta-model, gives specific recommendations to brands willing to build a true CBL. First, it is important that they develop the two levers that are *fundamental conditions*, namely the brand associations and brand offer. This first stage is essential because it will determine the success of other CBL strategies. To develop brand associations, they can enhance self-congruence by developing a brand personality for example. To develop positive perceptions of brand offer, they could work on their service quality by training the frontline employees for example. These elements that should be developed in a preliminary stage are crucial to the success of loyalty policies. When brand offer and brand associations are perceived positively by consumers, brands can work in a second stage, on the other levers that are *additional conditions* to develop CBL, namely brand experience and brand relationship through the enhancement of customer delight, satisfaction, trust and attachment. This process with main marketing levers helps managers to prioritize their strategies with a clear process to follow. Spending money on brand experience or brand relationship would be counterproductive if brand offer and or brand associations are not well perceived. This integrative meta-model with 9 core concepts, 4 main categories and a process of CBL development is a good template for managers to have in mind the main marketing levers to activate, and when it is more favorable to activate them.

7. Conclusion

Several authors have suggested the necessity to develop a general theory on CBL and several propositions were made (Dick and Basu 1994; Frisou 1998; Lichtlé and Plichon 2008...). However, the existing metamodels on CBL suffer from a lack of representativity of the different explanatory variables used in the past literature. Some important variables were clearly missing in the existing metamodel, so we filled this gap, by proposing a rigorous approach allowing to integrate the diversity of explanatory variables to the different existing theories. By creating categories of concepts, we could identify nine core concepts and four categories of concepts that are impacting CBL and bring forward their associated explanatory theories. Moreover, specific patterns emerged from these four categories, resulting in a process where brand offer and brand associations are fundamental conditions to form true CBL, whereas brand experience and brand relationship are additional conditions. This study is then giving a general theory for future research, with a clear representation of the main antecedents of CBL. This framework is also a good step-by-step guide that will help the marketers to activate the good marketing levers,

at the right time. However, this proposition should be strengthened, by conducting quantitative studies validating the relevance of these phases of CBL formation.

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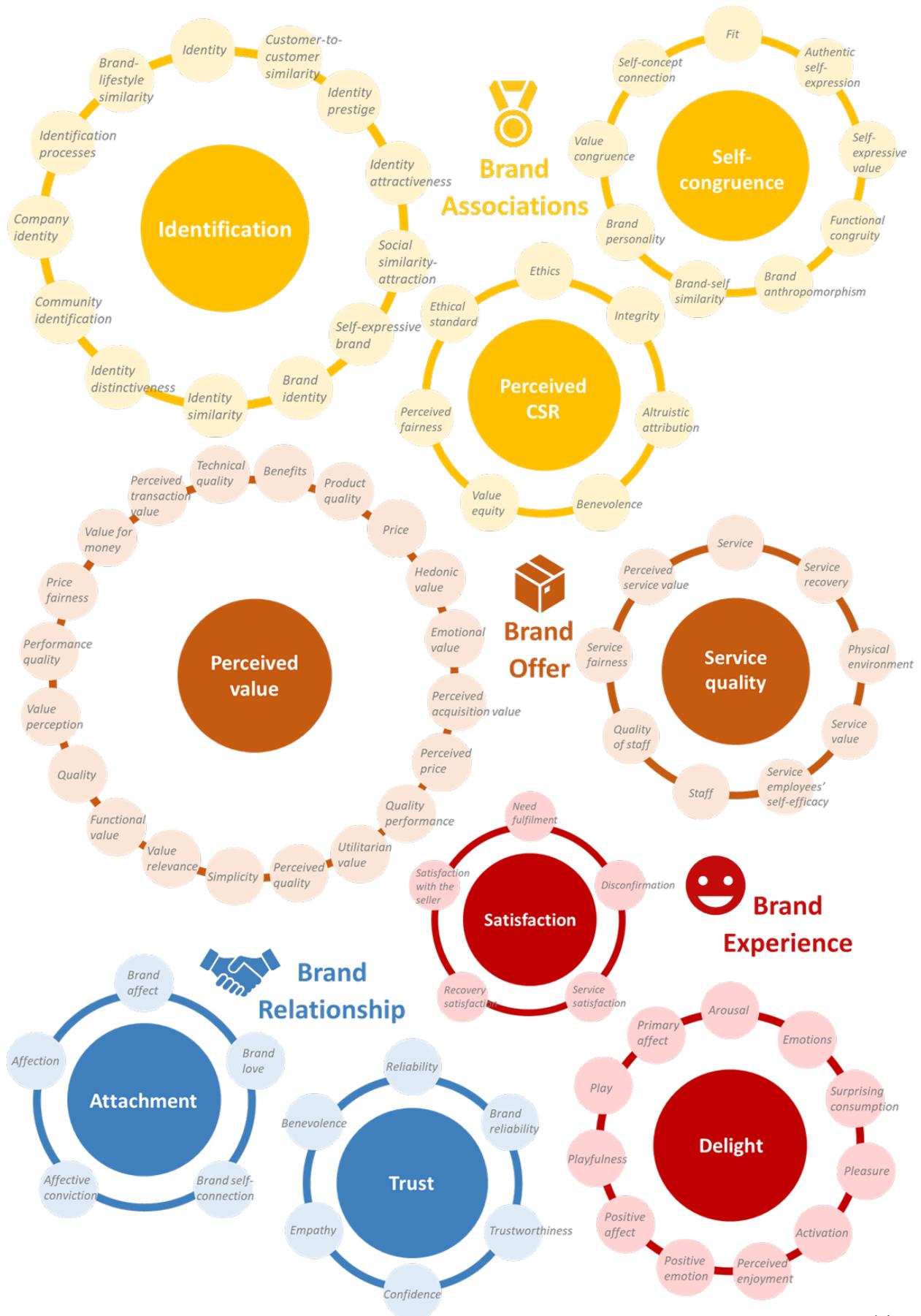
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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Core and peripheral concepts



Appendix 2 – Conceptual framework of CBL antecedents

