ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Issues in defining and placing consumer brand engagement

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Abstract

The paper aims to identify the current positioning of consumer brand engagement (CBE) in marketing literature, thus filling a gap and contributing to a richer overview of the concept. Numerous research topics currently overlap in the marketing literature as brand theory has not been systemised precisely, especially with regard to consumer feeling towards brands and consumers' active role in creating brand equity. The methodology adopted for this empirical research is qualitative, and the research question is the following: *what is the current positioning of CBE in marketing theory?* To find the answer, three empirical studies were performed. The first, Study 1, involved eight scholars—the key informants—specialising in the topic. In Study 2, 64 academic articles focusing on CBE were analysed. By comparing the two, it was possible to identify some counterintuitive problems and pitfalls impeding the definitive affirmation of CBE in marketing literature. Lastly, in Study 3, six Italian CBE practitioners (marketing managers and digital marketing consultants) were questioned to gather further information and shed light on some grey areas highlighted by the academic community regarding management issues. The principal expected outcome was to ascertain whether CBE has specific and well-defined conceptual dimensions that may be applied to other similar topics in marketing literature. The study's originality lies in a rationalisation of the theory underpinning the topic and proposing a possible systematisation.

Keywords Consumer brand engagement · Brand equity · Brand feeling · Brand love

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1 Introduction

Consumer engagement (from now on "CE"), consumer brand engagement (from now on "CBE"), and community online brand engagement (from now on "COBE") are of growing interest to both theoreticians and practitioners (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011a, b). The social impact of firms today derives from greater consumer engagement with brands. In turn, higher levels of brand engagement influence retention, advocacy, insights, differentiation and—indirectly—sales; they also determine the affirmation of a brand on the market (Baer, 2016; Obilo et al., 2021). As professional reports show (Gartner, 2020; Salesforce, 2020), customer engagement benefits company performance, improving brand—and customer—experience, reinforcing loyalty and trust, increasing sale funnel velocity and improving customer satisfaction among other things. The terms CE, CBE, and COBE describe the spontaneous, active, and productive role of consumers in their relationships with brands.

In the past, academics used a number of terms to describe the active role of consumers in their relationships with brands, such as 'prosumer' (Toffler, 1980), 'co-producer' (Norman & Ramirez, 1993; Wilkström, 1996), 'consum-actor' (Cova & Cova, 2009), 'co-creator' (Grönross, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), 'lead-user' (Von Hippel, 1986), and 'working consumer' (Cova & Dalli, 2009). Engagement also allows companies to absorb customers' knowledge and competencies (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000), converting them into market value. Furthermore, the new digital platforms leverage consumers' empowered capabilities (Cova & Pace, 2006) to increase customer awareness and participate actively in the brand-equity creation process. Engagement therefore becomes a relationship of co-creation, but participation may also take the form of conflict and resistance (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Peňaloza & Price, 1993; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Hollenbeek & Zinkhan, 2006; Wipperfürth, 2005).

Nowadays, the consumer is the leading supplier of operant resources in the business ecosystem. This new situation is acknowledged in Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), which sees consumers as active agents, leveraging their knowledge and capabilities in the value co-creation process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

CBE is an overarching marketing concept encompassing different consumer decision-making dimensions, from brand preference to brand purchase (Gambetti et al., 2012). Furthermore, CBE emerges as a multi-dimensional construct, which—beyond the traditional cognitive, emotional, and conative dimensions—seems to be rooted in emerging experiential and social dimensions. Moreover, from the management perspective, empirical research on engagement is quite limited as research focuses on identifying engagement behaviours in social media and online communities (Kaur et al., 2020; Matute et al., 2019). The studies mentioned identify involvement, interactivity, and experience as key drivers of CBE. In addition to satisfaction, trust, word-of-mouth referrals, and commitment as associated outcomes, identification and trust in the brand community act as moderators (Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018). In managerial practice, engagement is often understood as the consumer's reaction to a specific marketing "call to action", activated both on and offline.

In recent years, numerous similar and overlapping constructs have emerged in the academic marketing literature, which makes it challenging to choose among them, and engagement may be said to be a higher-order construct or another new construct conceptualised in the marketing literature.

The five sections of this article aim to explore and understand the new positioning and emerging limits of CBE. The first includes a review of the theory, highlighting the overlapping in the positioning of engagement in academic circles. The second section sets out the research design and question, and the three empirical studies to answer to the research question. Study 1 involved eight scholars specialising in the topic. In Study 2, 64 academic articles focusing on CBE were analysed. By comparing the two, it was possible to identify some counterintuitive problems and pitfalls impeding the definitive affirmation of CBE in marketing literature. Lastly, in Study 3, six Italian CBE practitioners (marketing managers and digital marketing consultants) were questioned to gather further information and shed light on some grey areas highlighted by the academic community regarding management issues. The third section discusses the findings. The fourth section sets out the general conclusions, the fifth the limitations and future developments of the research.

2 Theoretical review

In the fields of psychology (London et al., 2007), sociology (Achterberg et al., 2003), and organisational behaviour (Saks, 2006), engagement is generally based on a strong, individual-specific, context-specific, motivated, emotional, committed, and lasting relationship between a subject and an object (Hollebeek, 2011a, b).

CE, CBE, and COBE illustrate consumers' spontaneous, active, and co-productive role in their relationships with brands, their products, and/or services. Co-production and value co-creation (Lusch & Vargo, 2006a, 2006b) are mainstreams with a central role in Service-Dominant Logic and have been well-addressed in marketing literature.

The SDL perspective recognises business actors (consumers, suppliers, etc.) primarily as operant resources (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), namely resource integrators in the dynamic value co-creation process (Vargo & Lusch 2006, 2008). From this standpoint, Alexander et al. (2018, p. 336) argue that actor engagement behaviour is the decision of an actor (i.e. a customer, supplier) to interact with an object (i.e. a product or brand), investing and sharing his or her own resources (i.e. time, labour, knowledge, skills) to create value.

The reciprocal bidirectional nature of CE is conceptually aligned with the concepts of interactivity and co-creation underlying SDL (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011a, b; Lusch et al., 2010). In fact, five of the ten basic premises of SDL (the 1st, 6th, 8th, 9th, and 10th) highlight this conceptual overlapping.

According to the "working consumer" approach (Cova & Dalli, 2009), consumers co-create value and contribute to create the cultural horizon of brands. Consumers share opinions, values, and thoughts by developing direct social relationships or through collectively engaged consumer-brand communities or tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002).

The topic of brand engagement has so far been under-investigated and insufficiently conceptualised, and Obilo et al. (2021) demonstrated that existing scales of measurement neglect the behavioural component. On the other hand, Gambetti and Graffigna (2011) highlighted areas of overlapping and common ground with other constructs found in marketing literature. The meaning of 'brand engagement' is not always clear, nor is the term used unequivocally.

The concept of engagement overlaps with others in several ways. These include brand love and brand attachment, where a key element is the commitment or loyalty the consumer brings to the brand. Shimp and Madden (1988) propose a conceptual model of "consumer-object relationships" inspired by the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986), in which Sternberg's three components of love (intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment) become liking, yearning, and decision/commitment in the context of consumption. These three components strongly contribute to building consumer loyalty towards an object (brand). We believe these three dimensions strongly overlap with the three dimensions that characterise the CBE construct (i.e. cognitive, affective, and behavioural): intimacy with the brand is a cognitive dimension; passion is a clear manifestation of affect, and decision/commitment reflects a tendency to behave in a certain way.

Scholars consider engagement to reflect various dimensions. Hollebeek (2011a) identifies the dimensions of CBE as immersion, passion, and activation. Similarly, Scott and Craig-Lees (2010) identify "pleasure" as a dimension of audience engagement in specific media settings, while Li et al. (2018, p. 492) further conceptualise engagement within networks. Lastly, Sprott et al. (2009) measure brand engagement in terms of self-concept (BESC) to predict consumers' varying attention to, memory of, and preference for, their favourite brands.

With the spread of digital technology, engagement has recently found new and fertile terrain, bringing out the community focus rather than the individual-centred aspects, including all consumer-to-firm interaction and consumer-to-consumer communications concerning the brand. In particular, brand communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006) or brand tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002) become the engaged relational subjects that show active and direct commitment to companies and brands in a collective and social dimension, products, and/or services. It has thus become possible to identify a new engagement concept in marketing theory and practice, namely community or tribe brand engagement (COBE).

This article contributes above all to the understanding and consolidation of consumer (brand) engagement in marketing theory.

The research question investigated in this paper is the following: *what is the current positioning of CBE in marketing theory?*

To answer the research question proposed in this paper, we adopted an abductive reasoning approach (Kovács & Spens, 2005), carrying a marketing research approach with three empirical studies (Gummesson, 2005; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006) to explore the topic of customer/consumer engagement principally at brand level and from the theoretical perspective.

3 Study 1

3.1 Methodology

Study 1 (Swedberg, 2016) consists of an analysis of individual statements from interviews with a group of eight academics (key informants) engaged in CBE research, in order to collect evidence "from the ground" and/or identify any grey areas relating to the emergence of CBE in marketing literature. In line with the protocol suggested by Spiggle (1994), the statements recorded during the interviews were scrutinised using a well-known in-depth process of analysis and interpretation of qualitative data: categorisation, abstraction, comparison, dimensioning, integration, iteration, and refutation. The key informants (Kumar et al., 1993; Tremblay, 1957) were selected according to theoretical sampling criteria (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Internationally renowned professors and researchers were chosen, representing two theoretical paradigms of particular relevance to the evolution of marketing theory (Service Dominant Logic and Good Dominant Logic) in order to ensure the generalisability of the results (Gobo, 2004). Another factor in the choice of key informants was their particular area of research (brand equity, value co-creation, consumer brand relationship, and brand feelings). From the interviews it was possible to identify seven dimensions of CBE.

For the Italian academics, we carried out the interviews in Italian language. They have been transcribed in English, using a backward-translation approach. Instead, for the foreign academics, we carried out the interviews in English language. The empirical study (Study 1) soughts to investigate how a group of distinguished international marketing scholars conceptualise CBE and position it within brand theory, identifying similarities and differences compared with pre-existing marketing constructs, also identifying the principal issues likely to prevent its recognition in marketing theory.

Table A contained in Appendix of this paper shows how the internal and external validity of the Study 1 was established and, therefore, how the quality of the empirical study can be assessed (Berger et al., 2020; Mays & Pope, 2020; Spiggle, 1994) (Table 1).

3.2 Results

In the following, the seven dimensions emerging from the Study 1.

1. The first dimension that emerges relates to the *social and/or individual nature of CBE*.

   What is new for brand engagement is its highly interpersonal and social-value-building nature, as a consumer becomes engaged not only when developing a bond with the brand but also when he or she establishes a relationship with its social networks, this contributing to the brand's social value. At the same time, some

Table 1 The profiles of the academics involved in the key informant interviews

Informant	H-Index	Area of expertise	University
Respondent 1	H-Index 38	Full professor of marketing Marketing theory, strategy, branding, and service	University of Auckland Business School, New Zealand
Respondent 2	H-Index 13	Full professor of management Service marketing, Consumption experience, experiential marketing, arts and culture	Bocconi University Milan, Italy
Respondent 3	H-Index 7	Full professor of management and marketing Marketing asset evaluation, marketing, consumption, and technology behaviour	Luiss Guido Carli University, Rome, Italy
Respondent 4	H-Index 31	Professor of marketing Collective consumption, cultural branding	Kedge Business School, Marseille, France
Respondent 5	H-Index 9	Professor of management and techniques of communication Consumer culture, consumer insight, consumer brand engagement, cultural branding	Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy
Respondent 6	H-Index 35	Associate professor of marketing Customer/consumer engagement, technology (including social media), value, customer experience, service marketing, and branding	Montpellier Business School, France
Respondent 7	H-Index 33	Professor of integrated marketing communications Media marketing, database marketing, advertising, new media, and integrated marketing communications	Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA
Respondent 8	H-Index 21	Professor of management Service innovation, service ecosystems, and value co-creation	Federico II University of Naples, Italy

Source: authors' own

informants see engagement as a strictly individual and very personal trait of the customer, whose only reason for engaging with the brand regards the social aspects to which it is committed.

> Engagement is a very social phenomenon. It usually develops in digital environments, on social networks, hence 'social'; it is often a generator of brand communities […] consumer involvement in a virtual brand community generates specific interactive experiences between consumers and brands, and/or other members of the community. [Respondent 1].
>
> Engagement consists in the ability to attract consumers to virtual platforms, such as websites, ensuring they remain linked to them, creating an experience that then leads to brand loyalty. [Respondent 2].
>
> There is a clear difference between community engagement and brand engagement […] by community engagement we mean people are doing something for themselves and others who are part of a group; they share the same passion. By brand engagement, on the other hand, we mean actions carried out for the brand itself and not for the group of individuals who share the same passion […]. The example of the Alfisti is important, because they are committed and act for the benefit of other Alfisti and the Alfa brand but certainly not for the Fiat company (brand owner). [Respondent 4].
>
> The term engagement is polysemic as it means not only "being engaged" but also "to work for" or "to commit to" and therefore […] includes concepts such as tribalism […] so it is not simply a matter of feeling good around other individuals who use the same brand but building relationships with them, which the brand enables you to do. Once the relationship has developed, the brand does not necessarily remain the main reason for the relationship […]. This interpersonal dimension is very contemporary and postmodern. [Respondent 5].

2.   The second dimension refers to the *overlap of engagement with other constructs* that explain the relationship between brand and consumer.

It also identifies the antecedents or consequences of some of these constructs. Strong overlapping with some brand relationship constructs (brand involvement, brand attachment, brand love, brand experience, brand loyalty) is one of the main reasons why it is so difficult to define and interpret brand engagement. The same applies to the problem of establishing a chronological vision of the various brand relationship constructs. Which comes first?

> Constructs such as brand involvement, attachment and love are consequences of brand engagement […]. They are sub-processes of engagement: sharing, learning, socialisation, co-development […]. However, they are also antecedents of engagement; concepts such as participation, customer satisfaction, commitment, trust […]. Engagement behaviours lead to greater satisfaction and emotional loyalty; at the same time, satisfied and loyal customers determine more engagement behaviours. [Respondent 1].

Brand engagement is closely linked to brand experience in sparking a relationship. This experience can, in fact, have various consequences on bonding and trust and can give rise to actions and activities by the consumer […]. The concept of engagement refers to the company's ability to hook a customer in and maintain relations with him or her over time, translating into loyalty […]. The value that the consumer attaches to the experience is certainly an instance of value co-creation. [Respondent 2].

It would be interesting to demonstrate that CBE, brand love and brand attachment could be several phases of a relational process that begins with brand attachment, becomes brand love and ends with brand engagement, even if the construction of these phases is very complex. To prevent the construct being rejected by academic journals, I think the main thing is to show that brand engagement nurtures brand love/attachment and does not destroy it. [Respondent 4].

In my opinion, the constructs that come close to brand engagement, for which clear distinctions need to be formulated, are brand love and brand attachment […]. They espouse a concept of emotional bonding with the brand very similar to that of engagement. There is also brand experience, which I feel is very close to engagement, especially in terms of how Schmitt defines it […]. On the other hand, I don't think there is any kind of overlap with constructs such as brand loyalty and customer satisfaction, since when we talk about loyalty we are talking about something static that has no connection with the concept of engagement. [Respondent 5].

The link between loyalty and engagement relies on the fact that one precedes the other. Brand engagement is a precursor of brand loyalty. [Respondent 6].

Some constructs, such as commitment and involvement, are very similar and are close to engagement […]. Behavioural loyalty follows on from brand engagement. Affective loyalty is also a consequence of engagement, depending on what is meant by engagement. [Respondent 7].

3. The third dimension refers to the *multidimensionality of CBE*.

Some informants consider engagement to be characterised only by the behavioural dimension, comprising activism and tangible consumer behaviours that have no effect on the emotional and cognitive sphere. Other informants consider engagement to be strictly emotional and cognitive, developing in the consumer's mind as a psychosocial construct.

Engagement is a multidimensional concept that includes cognitive, emotional and/or behavioural dimensions; it plays a central role in the process of relational exchange where other relational concepts are antecedents and/or consequences. [Respondent 1].

Engagement is a psychological process that governs the mechanism through which the consumer's interest in how a product or service is created, and from which lasting and repeated loyalty develops over time. [Respondent 2].

"To be engaged", in sociological terms, means being involved to the point of feeling so connected to another subject that you feel involved psychologically, emotionally, and cognitively. [Respondent 8].

With regard to engagement, we need to focus on the behavioural dimension, while the other dimensions qualify other constructs, so, chronologically speaking they play the role of antecedent. [Respondent 3].

4. The fourth dimension refers to the *nature of CBE in terms of interactivity and dynamism*.

Engagement involves a dimension related to fun and interaction with the brand, which can lead to greater involvement and drive consumers to collaborate with the brand by participating in the offer system, both in terms of values and operationally. The consumer is induced to interact, either to reduce a strongly perceived risk, or because of a high expectation of some kind of benefit that might be obtained through the same interaction.

Engagement can be distinguished from involvement thanks to its interactive aspect. The consumer is in a psychological state and has different levels of intensity, so we can say the brand engagement process is iterative and dynamic. [Respondent 1].

The term "interaction" best characterises customer engagement and distinguishes it from other concepts. This interaction has two dimensions, making the consumer part of two processes: the innovation process and the communication process. [Respondent 3].

Engagement represents an interactive experience, while co-creation allows the customer to co-create perceived value following an interaction (co-creation is a possible consequence of engagement). [Respondent 6].

5. The fifth dimension refers to the *spontaneous and/or induced nature of CBE*.

Some of the informants see engagement as a spontaneous and autonomous phenomenon stemming from a customer's rational decision to be engaged: the outcome of personal and cognitive motivations. Other informants claim that engagement can be both spontaneous and induced, depending on who triggers the engagement; it may not always arise in the consumer's mind, but can sometimes be activated by a stimulus coming from the firm. This consideration affects the discussion about the differences between CBE and brand experience.

Engagement is a phenomenon triggered by the firm, and the consequence of appropriate marketing strategy. [Respondent 1].

Engagement is not an interaction relationship among equals; it is dominated and guided by the brand […] it is the concept of spontaneity that makes the distinction between the concept of engagement and that of other concepts, especially co-creation, for which a stimulus is needed. [Respondent 2].

I believe that experience can be said to be induced, while engagement is spontaneous, also leading us to look for an experience. […] Customer experience is one of the elements that contribute to involvement and therefore engagement. [Respondent 3].

To be engaged is a voluntary and cognitive act; it is my mind that decides to do something, while the relationships established between the consumer and brands are emotional. They are not the result of a conscious decision, which is a necessary element in brand engagement. Behind the word engagement there is a decision (to engage, consciously and reflecting carefully), while behind the concepts of brand love and brand attachment there is no decision at all; it is simply an instinctive attitude. [Respondent 4].

Engagement can be both spontaneous and induced. From the firm's point of view, it is induced. In my engagement ecosystem model, it is possible to identify which brand actions generate engagement. Of course, engagement can sometimes be spontaneous. [Respondent 7].

Engagement can be induced or spontaneous, and this depends on the context, sometimes occurring spontaneously (for example, the creation of brand communities or the Facebook pages), but other times it can be induced (the firm involves consumers in events or other types of experience for example). [Respondent 6].

6. The sixth dimension that emerged from the study refers to *the link between CBE, SDL, and value co-creation.*

All the informants somehow agree that brand engagement is a construct that hinges well with SDL and value co-creation. In fact, the broad, complex, multidimensional, and strongly consumer-centred essence of brand engagement is highly consistent with some fundamental principles of SDL.

SDL guides engagement; it is a general theory capable of accommodating multiple constructs, including brand engagement. Co-creation is a high-order theory, whereas engagement is a second-order theory. The two concepts often overlap, but they operate at different levels […]; co-creation drives SDL in the same way engagement drives specific behaviours such as purchase and loyalty. [Respondent 1].

SDL represents a container […] engagement, on the other hand, represents a more restricted concept relating to the process of creating a relationship between brand, product, service, and consumer—and maintaining this relationship over time. The concept of co-creation, on the other hand, emphasises the active role of the consumer in the relationship that is created […] engagement can be seen as an SDL and value co-creation lever. [Respondent 2].

Engagement can be an important operational lever to allow the interaction that is fundamental to SDL; it could be a construct that validates it also from the operational point of view. So, I believe SDL can only be a back-

ground to CBE, one of the managerial approaches to be considered in order to increase and enhance CBE. It's a managerial, non-scientific approach employing very pragmatic concepts. [Respondent 2].

The engagement construct is certainly a child of post-modernism, so, if we think of a theoretical umbrella term, we can refer to the theory of co-creation. But value co-creation could also be seen as a mere consequence of engagement, which may or may not materialise. So I think co-creation is an unnecessary condition, but it could arise in the wake of engagement […]. If the consumer experiences this engagement in a very subjective way, then co-creation is not particularly explicit because he or she experiences the bond very personally, but if there is a more social and interpersonal dimension, the value co-creation element becomes more important. [Respondent 5].

SDL represents a very broad general theory, which I consider a way of embedding the concept of engagement and to explain the interactive experience, as well as the co-creation of value, but it is also advisable to refer to other general theories, including Consumer Culture Theory and Social Practice Theory. However, engagement should not be confused with a meta-concept found within the different general theories (like SDL, Consumer Culture Theory and Social Practice Theory) and providing the basis for explaining an interactive experience and co-creation of value. [Respondent 6].

7. The seventh and last dimension refers to the *value or functional/operational nature of CBE.*

Brand engagement can have both a value and a functional/operational nature. This depends on the type of benefits the consumer can obtain from his or her relationship with the brand, which may be experiential and value-based or simply utilitarian.

Engagement has an operational nature; because of these functional aspects, this concept overlaps with co-creation. [Respondent 2].

Integrating the engaged consumer in an innovative process can involve the micro-differentiation of the product, performed by the consumer but with no commitment from the firm, up to the differentiation that takes place through variously sophisticated customisation mechanisms and collaborative innovation along a continuum, a measure of the intensity of brand engagement. The less I am engaged, the less I want to help the firm or the brand to improve its products. [Respondent 3].

The nature of engagement is value: it is existential during the first phase, and it is then expressed in a series of operational activities in which the consumer can decide to engage. This is a possible, but not obligatory, consequence of the engagement process. The behavioural activation component is part of engagement […]; the most important aspect characterising engagement is certainly not the operational one, but the matching and harmony of values between the consumer and the brand: this is the driver of everything that comes later, but it is not just a "like" on a Facebook page. [Respondent 5].

I think engagement consists in the involvement and co-creation of the value component of a consumer-brand relationship. The consumer is not involved in operational and executive activities. To strengthen the relationship between the cognitive and emotional components of CBE, we should bear in mind the original meaning of marriage, which is held in high estimation. [Respondent 8].

4 Study 2

4.1 Methodology

Study 2 (extensive and in-depth analysis of the literature) consisted of a content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Rosado-Pinto et al., 2020) of a corpus created from the discussion and conclusion paragraphs of 64 articles on consumer engagement found in prestigious international journals (see Appendix). Only articles featuring the term "engagement" in their titles and published in top-ranked journals specialising in marketing or related disciplines were selected. All the articles chosen seek to better conceptualise and/or measure/assess the topic in an empirical setting, so it was decided to create the corpus text collecting only the discussion and conclusion paragraphs rather than the overall contents. It was hoped that this would bring together the contributions of various scholars and foster the advancement of the literature on the topic in question. This second part of the study was carried out from September to December 2018. The articles were downloaded from the primary research databases (Scopus and Web of Science) using a keyword research procedure. It was not easy to collect articles dealing with the concept of CBE, as most of the high-profile international journals do not publish many articles on the topic of CBE. This means that some internationally top-ranked journals are not included in this collection. Qualitative data emerging from the interviews and those selected from articles were transcribed into two corpora of texts and analysed separately using text-mining software. Thematic cluster analysis (Guest et al., 2011; Joffe & Yardley, 2004; Nie & Sun, 2017) highlighted some significant *"themes"* on latent semantic axes, described by the lexical units characterising the corpora submitted for two separate analyses (in terms of chi^2).

The main purpose of this study of marketing literature is to explore how scholars have contributed to the general advancement of CBE by examining the discussion and conclusion paragraphs of 64 articles taken from the literature. The following sections report the main findings of this second empirical research phase.

Table A contained in Appendix of this paper shows how the internal and external validity of the Study 2 was established and, therefore, how the quality of the empirical study can be assessed (Berger et al., 2020; Mays & Pope, 2020; Spiggle, 1994).

4.2 Results

The thematic cluster analysis used text-mining software to identify four cultural repertoires defined as *"emerging themes"* (see Figure in Appendix). The meaning

given to each emerging theme derives from the keywords and sentences that the software considers to provide more information about their contents. The meaning given to each of them derives from keywords and key sentences that the software considers more informative regarding the contents. The chi-squared information for the keywords is a measure of how much the observed values differ from the theoretical ones. The latter correspond to the measure of equidistribution of the same keywords among the various clusters. Therefore, for a given keyword, a higher chi-squared value shows to what extent it characterizes that cluster compared with the others. On the other hand, for each individual key sentence, the software calculates a score based on the chi2 of the keywords and the characteristics of the specific cluster found in the same sentence. A higher score for a single key-sentence thus indicates that it is well able to predict the meaning to give to the specific cluster in relation to the informative cumulative contribution of the various keywords contained in it. In what follows, only our interpretation for each "emerging theme" grounded on the text mining findings will be reported, deferring to the Table B in Appendix for any further elaboration on the aforementioned detailed information (keywords' chi2 values and key sentences' individual scores) that characterizes the individual clusters. Furthermore, the software also provides references to the articles, working papers, and conference papers that explain each emerging theme best, selecting them from the 64 included in the dataset.

"Emerging theme 1" (20.1% of the total corpus) refers to content related to user engagement and disengagement in relation to the offer systems from firms operating in the service sector. The keywords that best express the contents of this cluster show a *chi*^{2} ranging from 1090.20 to 3.87, and the key sentences have a score of between 2716.464 and 1635.906. In these scenarios, the relationships that link users to the service provider are akin to interpersonal relationships in human behaviour. Customers show positive engagement towards other community members or the brand but manifest disengagement mainly towards the service provider. Conceptually, a distinction must be made between negative and positive engagement (Azer & Alexander, 2018; Li et al., 2018) on the one hand and disengagement on the other. In fact, a consumer can show strong involvement with either the brand, the community, or the provider for both positive and negative reasons. This can happen when customers use a digital platform to continuously and constantly demonstrate their dissent regarding a certain brand choice in relation to tactical and strategic choices (negative engagement). Otherwise, disengagement occurs when consumers interrupt their (positive or negative) relationship with the brand and permanently leave the brand or provider. Carvalho and Fernandes (2018) identified the determinants for word-of-mouth ("WOM"), such as brand passion, brand influence, hedonic rewards, utilitarian rewards, validation, helping, etc. It has been demonstrated (through communication initiatives) that some determinants (brand passion, utilitarian and hedonic rewards, and validation) help to explain positive engagement in love communities, others (brand influence, helping and utilitarian and hedonic rewards) explain negative engagement (hate/aversion) towards the brand in so-called hate communities.

Three studies best inform the meaning assigned to *"emerging theme 1"* (Bowden et al., 2015; Naumann et al., 2017; Breidbach et al., 2014).

The first of these contains a qualitative exploration of the concept of customer disengagement (triggers, nature, and the process by which it unfolds) within functional/utilitarian (F/U) and participative/co-creative services (P/C). "It finds that engagement and disengagement are highly connected and that prior levels of engagement significantly influenced customers' subsequent propensities to disengage" (Bowden et al., 2015, p. 1).

The second contribution "seeks to address this gap by exploring how positive, disengaged, and negative valences of engagement operate within the social service sector. Focus groups are used to create a multidimensional model exploring how different customer engagement valences operate through affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, and in relation to two objects (service community and service provider)" (Naumann et al., 2017, p. 1).

The third contribution highlights that Breidbach et al. (2014, p. 604) "… develop and introduce the 'engagement ecosystem' concept into the service research literature, explain the nature of the concept's theoretical association to engagement platforms, and contribute to the wider discourse on service ecosystems that has recently emerged in the discussion about the Service-Dominant Logic (e.g., Lusch & Vargo, 2010)". The latter is especially helpful in explaining contexts where engagement, or more correctly, disengagement occurs, such as engagement ecosystems or contexts with a high service component, such as those considered by SDL. Lastly, in the fourth contribution, "four sets of propositions are developed that contribute to defining the conceptual domain of actor engagement valence. These propositions clarify that the valence of actor engagement has triggers and various antecedents; demonstrate the dynamic nature of actors' positive engagement, negative engagement and a combination of both, and show the relationship between the valence of actor engagement and engagement behaviours, and the role of individual as well as network factors" (Li et al., 2018, p. 506). Hence the label assigned to *"emerging theme 1"* is *"Customer disengagement in the service ecosystem",* also because the scholars conceptualising disengagement largely took Service Logic and SDL as their starting point.

"Emerging theme 2" (23.24% of the total corpus) introduces content related to the drivers best able to explain customer engagement in online communities. The keywords that most aptly express the content of this cluster show a *chi*^{2} ranging from 186.97 to 3.95, while the key sentences have a score of between 1052.599 and 298.111. In addition, positive or negative online engagement behaviour has, or may have, an impact on WOM and other consumer-brand relationship constructs. Studies that explain the meaning attributed to *"emerging theme 2"* have been carried out by the following authors: Wu et al. (2018), Pagani and Malacarne (2017), Beckers et al. (2018).

The first contribution (Wu et al., 2018, p. 1) confirms that "consumer engagement in a brand community increases the likelihood of generating post-purchase reviews and increases the likelihood of posting positive online reviews". The second contribution (Pagani & Malacarne, 2017) postulates that experiential engagement is a second-order construct made up of two first-order "experience" constructs: Personal Engagement (stimulation and inspiration, temporal experience,

social facilitation, community, self-esteem), and Social-Interactive Engagement (utilitarian perception, participation and socialisation, intrinsic enjoyment).

The third contribution (Beckers et al., 2018), on the other hand, highlights the impact of firm-initiated customer engagement not only on the client but also on value for shareholders. In fact, the study shows that in the case of American public companies with a strong brand reputation, such engagement initiatives (on Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, etc.) can reduce economic value due to shareholder concern that they may not be successful, so a greater perception of the risk concerning the expected positive return of engagement initiatives is reflected in the economic value of the share.

If the consumer develops an aversion to the brand in digital contexts, a state of "enragement" (negative engagement) can lead to loss of value and a consequent weakening of the customer brand relationship (Peeroo et al., 2019). Two different engagement visions emerge depending on whether the owner of the engagement is the brand or the provider rather than the consumer acting spontaneously. Thus, the label assigned to *"emerging theme 2"* is *"Firm-initiated consumer brand engagement in the online context"*.

"Emerging theme 3" (30.22% of the total corpus) concerns the conceptualisation of CBE from the academic perspective. The keywords that best express the contents of this cluster have a *chi*^{2} from 333.37 to 3.88, while the key sentences score between 931,465 and 335,866. This theme is therefore assigned the label *"CBE conceptualisation in marketing literature"*. The first contribution (Hollebeek et al., 2014) explaining the meaning of *"emerging theme 3"* aims to conceptualise consumer engagement with greater precision in an approach largely functional to broader adoption with respect to the study perspectives that best interpret its meaning (Service-Dominant Logic, Consumer Culture Theory, Relationship Marketing). In fact, there is no doubt that the topic of CBE has been developed from the theoretical perspective of SDL (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

However, as Brodie et al. (2011) observe, the definitive affirmation of CBE as a superordinate relational construct is linked to its diffusion within different and complementary areas (mainly Consumer Culture Theory and Service Logic). Moreover, the names of the first two authors mentioned above (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014) appear among the keywords that characterise *"emerging theme 3"*, underlining their important role in the conceptualisation of the topic, widely acknowledged in the selected literature. An example of such alternative or complementary perspectives includes the "Nordic School's service logic (Grönroos, 2006), which, despite a degree of conceptual similarity, exhibits focal differences related to S-D logic. Further, Bolton (2011) advocates the adoption of a 'co-creation perspective' of customer engagement (Grönroos & Voima, 2013)" (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 162).

The model proposed considers only one determinant of CBE, namely consumer involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1994), and two result variables: self-brand connection (Escalas, 2004), and brand usage intent (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). However, *CBE* "is reconceptualized as a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions" (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154) in three dimensions, all representing new

conceptions: CBE cognitive processing, the CBE affection factor, and the CBE activation factor. "Cognitive processing" is defined as "a consumer's level of brand-related thought processing and elaborating in a particular consumer/brand interaction" (i.e. the cognitive CBE dimension). "Affection" refers to "a consumer's degree of positive brand-related affect in a particular consumer/brand interaction" (i.e. the emotional CBE dimension). "Activation" is defined as "a consumer's level of energy, effort and time spent on a brand in a particular consumer/brand interaction" (i.e. the behavioural CBE dimension) (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154).

The second contribution (Gambetti et al., 2012) proposes CBE as a multidimensional construct that emerges, beyond its traditional cognitive, emotional, and conative dimensions, as a super-ordered or umbrella construct under which other key marketing constructs are, or should, be placed. We study the relationship between brand and consumer and the brand's effort to come closer to its consumers and develop an even more robust relationship with them from the moment of purchase. On the other hand, from the practitioners' perspective, the brand acts as a connector and/or intensifier of the various dimensions that can foster the development of the brand-consumer relationship over time.

There are two dimensions to the new conceptualisation of CBE: the first supersedes the physical, corporeal, and multisensory elements of the encounter between brand and consumer, while the second is the social dimension, consisting in interaction, participation, dialogue, and the sharing among consumers of values and content related to the brand. Furthermore, CBE is also a multi-phase concept with different levels of investigation. The first level is "brand enacting", which means that the consumer puts the brand into action by participating in its world; the second level is that of the "consumer's formal protagonism", in which brands try to lure consumers by allowing them the freedom to be protagonists in the relationship with them (Gambetti et al., 2012).

The third contribution (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2011) focuses on the commonalities and differences between the BE construct and other equally important constructs in relational marketing (customer experience, involvement, attachment, loyalty, etc.). From comparing the academic perception (reflected in marketing scholarship) and practitioners' views, we propose to move conceptualisation forward by preventing the CBE construct from conflicting with all the others in the marketing literature focusing on relationships (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2011).

The label assigned to *"emerging theme 4"* (26.43% of the total corpus) is *"Consumer engagement behaviour (CEB) in social networks"*. The keywords that best express the contents of this cluster show a *chi^2* ranging from 385.95 to 4.31, while the key sentences score between 1,674.451 and 666.621. Several studies clearly reflect the meaning assigned to this important theme (Pentina et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2018; Gavilanes et al., 2018). In fact, by interpreting and combining the keywords and the key sentences that explain it, one may deduce that it is inherent to certain aspects of consumer engagement on social media from the consumer perspective. Some contributions (Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018), in fact, clarify the determinants (involvement, participation, flow experience, interactivity) of engagement on social media together with their outcomes (commitment, trust, WOM referrals, cumulative satisfaction). The driver with the highest impact

on CBE is customer involvement. Indeed, virtual communities, thanks to which quantitative studies can be carried out, make it possible to overcome a limitation of existing CBE research, which can be excessively conceptual and qualitative.

Articles analysing the topic of CBE in digital contexts do not share a univocal definition or operationalisation of the construct. The problem is not easy to solve, given the degree of ambiguity of the CBE concept in marketing studies. It requires further understanding and a shared definition of CBE that can be accepted by the entire scientific community and be valid in all research settings.

The first contribution (Pentina et al., 2018), which best explains the content of *"emerging theme 4"*, identifies and classifies some concrete consumer activities that impact CEB in the social media (SM). Understanding consumer behaviour within social networks has become an important research topic (Park & Ono, 2017) in recent years. Such behaviour is a starting point for new academic research on digital brand engagement. This study explores and measures behaviours that can be traced back to the five conceptual categories pertaining to the luxury sector: (1) the intended engagement audience (through behaviour aiming to produce greater co-creation output on new brand meanings); (2) the intensity of applied effort and creativity (though initiatives aiming to stimulate conversations about brands, which can create new meanings and associations); (3) the content-creation medium (through the use of the main mediums to stimulate the negotiation of new meanings for the brand on social media); and (4) the dominant motivational drivers (the CEBs that produce greater involvement and creativity are those driven by the need to satisfy multiple information needs, socialisation, status, remuneration, entertainment, and the maintenance of the relationship rather than individual ones). This same direct relationship exists between creativity and the intrinsic motivations of the consumer (self-improvement, self-expression, self-actualisation) on the one hand, and the extrinsic ones (approval or search for feedback) on the other. The fifth category is engagement behaviour and the use of social media platforms (each social media platform has different functions and use from the others in terms of consumer engagement activities: passive or active, emotional-rational content, user skills, etc.).

The second contribution (Lu et al., 2018) adopts a cultural perspective (Choi & Han, 2011) to understand, through qualitative analysis, how two different geographical and cultural contexts (China and USA) influence the experience and behaviour of two important social media (Facebook and Renren) engaged with two important global photographic brands (Canon and Nikon). Both user groups (Canon and Nikon) share experiences about camera use and brand on both social media. "The findings show that consumers in the Renren group are actively engaged in social networking practices, sharing information regarding the product or brand, encouraging the uses of the product-brand, documenting special occasions with the brand or product. Instead, the consumers in the Facebook group are engaged with networking activities with members" (Lu et al., 2018, p. 304). This study thus emphasises the influence that different consumption cultures have on engagement behaviour on different social media platforms (Habibi et al., 2014; Choi & Han, 2011) and could probably soon create, if well explored, an incidental link between CBE and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT).

The third contribution is a model presented by Gavilanes et al. (2018), measuring how much advertising promoted by the firm impacts digital consumer engagement (DCE). For this purpose, the main metrics available on Facebook are considered valuable predictors of the consumer's response behaviour on the digital community. Therefore, (a) the "impression" is considered a metric of a lack of engagement (fruition of the advertising message does not lead to interaction with the brand; (b) the "click" (open/hide/close) is a poor measure of DCE in that it is neutral consumption, as the consumer's response demonstrates attention to and potential interest in the brand; (c) the "like" is a moderate DCE metric, namely a response showing a positive emotional state towards the advertising content; (d) the "comment" is a moderate-to-strong DCE metric as it implies an affective and cognitive process activity, namely a co-creation activity in the context of the brand, and finally, (d) "sharing" is considered an advocacy metric, with a strong DCE indicator, showing greater (emotional) personal consumer investment in the brand than just engaging cognitively and affectively (Gavilanes et al., 2018).

The findings of the thematic cluster analysis allow interpretation of the meaning of the three *"transversal themes"*, related, as mentioned above, to more than one emerging theme simultaneously.

The *"first transversal theme"* is labelled the *"theoretical perspective under which CBE has been developed (Service-Dominant Logic/Customer logic)"*. In fact, the CBE construct was initially conceptualised in the context of SDL studies, which was looking for a new concept that would allow the brand ecosystem to be operationalised from an experiential perspective. The scholars who brought the main contribution to the conceptualisation of CBE are Brodie and Hollebeek, who, as mentioned earlier, strongly characterises *"emerging theme 3"*. The very concept of customer disengagement (*"emerging theme 1"*) becomes particularly important in the field of services. These studies have examined whether and how a distinction between the categories of utilitarian and hedonistic services can aid a better recognition of faster or slower customer disengagement in the event of service failure. Moreover, the constructs of *"CEB in social networks"* (*"emerging theme 4"*) and *"customer disengagement in the service ecosystem"* (*"emerging theme 1"*) have been addressed from a consumer-logic perspective.

The *"second transversal theme"* is labelled *"brand engagement scientific relevance"* (theoretical-conceptual vs empirical). Indeed, the concept of engagement arises in a highly theoretical research context that also borrows meaning from other fields (sociology, psychology, education, organisation). Thus, the negative segment of this second transversal theme mainly contains a concentration of the original studies working for a better conceptualisation of CBE through a systematisation of the literature on the subject. The correlation of "emerging themes 1 and 2" with the "second transversal theme" has two causes: the development of the concept of engagement looks to either the empirical validation of explorative or confirmative studies. The studies propose interpretative models or measurement scales in a predominantly empirical research setting. Lastly, *"emerging theme 4"* is situated in a more central position than the *"second transversal theme"* since contributions on CEB lie halfway between a theoretical/conceptual contribution on the topic and an explorative/measurement of the construct.

Lastly, the *"third transversal theme"* is labelled *"brand engagement related to the nature of consumer involvement (firm-initiated vs consumer-initiated)"*. In fact, the position of *"emerging theme 2"* explains better than any others the meaning to attribute to this third transversal theme. The studies that best explain "emerging theme 2" make it possible to deduce that they aim to study consumer behaviour in digital contexts as an outcome of the initiatives undertaken by firms to stimulate the engagement of their customers (*firm-initiated customer engagement*). On the other hand, both *"emerging theme 1"* and *"emerging theme 4"* tend to analyse disengagement or CEB from a standpoint not stimulated by businesses. Both those behaviours, in fact, originate in events not planned by the company (disengagement in the event of service failure) or consumer perceptions (consumer engagement positive behaviours). Lastly, we need only mention the position of *"emerging theme 3"*. It is generally accepted that 'engagement' in the marketing sphere was initially—and prevalently—conceptualised according to consumer logic rather than business logic.

5 Study 3

5.1 Methodology

Finally, a third study (Study 3) was carried out. It involved CBE practitioners from various industries, which allowed us to address the issues from a practical perspective and thus arrive at a final conceptualisation. Study 3, on the other hand, consisted of an analysis of the textual units and individual statements expressed by the informants during interview. These regarded the definition, implementation, and findings of CBE solutions in their everyday business practice. Thus, in line with the protocol suggested by Spiggle (1994), the statements produced were processed following a well-known and thorough process of analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research: categorisation, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalisation, integration, iteration, and refutation. The marketing managers interviewed were selected from people in the consumer goods industry and among digital marketing-solution practitioners so that the findings would not be influenced by the context, where digital and physical CBE solutions are applied. This group of CBE practitioners (marketing managers and digital marketing consultants), from various industries (consumer goods such as water, pasta, coffee, pet food and digital communication and marketing), allowed us to explore how it conceptualises CBE and practices it within their respective business activities, in digital and/or physical contexts, and thus to arrive at a final conceptualisation, clarifying some minor ambiguities or doubts regarding CBE theory persisted throughout the abductive reasoning phase (Study 1 and 2). The practitioners interviewed were the Head of Marketing with one of the leading Italian mineral water companies, the Head of Marketing and E-commerce at an Italian pet food company, the Global E-commerce and Digital Manager with a leading brand on the Italian coffee market, the CEO of a leading international consultancy and technological innovation company, the Head of the Italian Division of a leading international consultancy company in privacy-first location-powered programmatic advertising, and the Commercial Director and Global Marketing

Director of a leading international high-quality pasta brand (Table 2). The managers are 45–50 years old. This part of the study took place from May to September 2021. For them, we carried out the interviews in Italian language. They have been transcribed in English, using a backward-translation approach.

Table A contained in Appendix of this paper shows how the internal and external validity of the Study 3 was established and, therefore, how the quality of the empirical study can be assessed (Berger et al., 2020; Mays & Pope, 2020; Spiggle, 1994).

A systematic review of the literature proved helpful in combining theoretical and practical perspectives (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006; Tranfield et al., 2003) since the "context of application" has become central to the debate on the future of management research.

The empirical study proposed in this article analyses and interprets qualitative data in consumer research (Spiggle, 1994) to explore the topic of CE principally at brand level and from a managerial perspective. A qualitative analysis was conducted regarding management, and interviews were held with managers of companies belonging to different business areas (pasta, pet food, coffee, water, digital and marketing communication). Following Spiggle (1994), we codified the interviews and identified different dimensions for interpreting CBE from the managerial and consultancy points of view.

5.2 Results

Seven dimensions of CBE emerged from the Study 3.

1. The first dimension to emerge refers to the *nature of CBE in relation to product type*.

CBE emerges as an emotional construct closely linked to product type. Highly engaging products (cars, motorcycles, smartphones, luxury products) can engender a powerful emotional bond in consumers, and, at the same time, they can diminish consumer rationality. On the other hand, mass-market products do not always create a powerful emotional bond with the consumer. In this case, a consumer's decision to purchase a product is driven by functional and rational aspects such as price and taste.

Table 2 The managers involved in the key-informant interviews

Informant	Area of expertise	Business
Respondent 1	Marketing manager for Italy and Malta	Pet foods
Respondent 2	Commercial director and global marketing director	Food
Respondent 3	Founder and CEO	Advice
Respondent 4	Head of marketing	Mineral water
Respondent 5	Agency group head	Advice
Respondent 6	Global E-commerce and digital manager	Food

In the case of mass-market products, the consumer first chooses the product and then evaluates whether he likes the brand or not; he does not have to like it. Thus, in the case of consumer products, consumer engagement must be based on functional and tangible aspects. [Respondent 4].

For most products and services, CBE has dual aspects: emotional and functional/rational. There is emotional and rational engagement, the second of which is based on customer satisfaction with the product/service. This engagement is the basis for building an emotional relationship with the consumer. [Respondent 6].

2. The second dimension refers to the *nature of CBE in relation to the brand*.

CBE can come about spontaneously, or it can be triggered depending on the brand. CBE is spontaneous when it refers to a cult brand.

Several iconic brands (Ducati, Nutella, Apple, Lego, Porsche, Harley Davidson, Nike) already have a huge fanbase of people in love or engaged with them. The firms themselves do not have to do much to create engagement since their brands spontaneously create it. Conversely, other firms have to create a strategic plan to engage customers with their brands. [Respondent 1].

Concerning consumer products, CBE has to be triggered by the firms.

Engagement initiatives in this case inevitably start from the brand; only later may the consumer wish to establish a bond with it. The emotion arises in the consumer but must be driven by the brand. [Respondent 1].
Engagement is mainly sparked by the firm, and later on, the consumer may become a brand co-creator. Communities can develop spontaneously only around cult brands. In theory, when a brand and a consumer share the same values, the user may generate brand content from the ground. This is very challenging to achieve, and firms often encourage this attitude. Only cult brands activate spontaneous behaviours. This is because the consumer identifies with the brand, almost becoming dependent on it. Owning an iconic brand says a lot about who or what consumers want to be, feel they are, and how they want others to see them. [Respondent 5].
The Harley Davidson case is different: consumers themselves create events to emphasise their bond with the brand. This is undoubtedly a natural attachment to the brand and therefore a more solid, stronger, and longer-lasting one, an indicator of the absolute strength of the brand and its customers' unconditional loyalty. [Respondent 3].

3. The third dimension refers to the *nature of CBE in relation to the market*.

This dimension put in relationship the feature of the market, emerging vs consolidated, in which the brand operates and the type of engagement that the consumer activates with the brand.

In emerging markets and during the launch of new products, firms stimulate CBE to create awareness and engage the customer. Launching a new product on the market without a strong brand and without a firm attempting to create engagement would be unsuccessful because engagement cannot happen on its own. [Respondent 3].

Instead, CBE represents a differentiating variable in mature markets and is thus a competitive lever.

Working on engagement and the creation of new forms of consumer entertainment is very important today, especially in markets where there is now a standard level of quality, so competition should no longer be based on either quality or price, but on the communication of values […]. Engagement is important in the first phase of the relationship with the consumer, in which it is necessary to catch him, develop a bond, and make him fall in love with the brand. Then, it is necessary to propose a product/service with values that drive the consumer to make the purchase, form a sense of loyalty, and purchase again to significantly impact turnover. [Respondent 5].

4.   The fourth dimension that emerged from the study concerns what firms expect *CBE initiatives* to achieve and their expected impact.

Initiatives to involve consumers can have either long or short-term objectives. CBE initiatives can foster the co-creation of value and the long-term strengthening of the brand identity. This type of initiative is not measurable in terms of impact on sales. At the same time, firms may have short-term goals and focus consumer engagement initiatives on functional aspects. Unlike initiatives focused on co-creating value, these types of initiatives are easily measurable in terms of impact on sales.

When developing an engagement campaign, you must try to do everything possible to measure its effects. As a CBE campaign should translate into increased sales or loyalty, you must always allocate investments to measure this type of result; otherwise, you will not be able to measure the impact. In other words, if you plan the campaign to create brand values and culture, you cannot measure the return on investment, so there is no impact to measure. [Respondent 3].

5.   The fifth dimension refers to the *context (online vs offline) in which CBE develops*.

Online engagement allows an immediate reaction from the consumer and makes bilateral communication possible. A consumer who engages the brand in conversation often initiates this communication.

In the past, firms considered consumers passive subjects while today they are seen as active, even proactive. It is often the consumer who triggers the con-

versation, and the digital means is an enabler and facilitator that simplifies the way the consumer accesses and develops interactions with the brand […]. The same reasoning should be applied to relationships formed among the consumers themselves. These did not exist in the past, but they are multiple, frequent, and easy today […]. On the one hand, digital technology represents an excellent opportunity for creating a contact and a relationship with the consumer, but, on the other, it has increased the level of complexity in managing them […]. In addition, online engagement allows firms to activate a careful segmentation and personalisation of CBE campaigns and customer experience. Digital technology provides more, and higher quality, information and data that allow firms to create very precise, complex, and personalised user experiences, which facilitates the development of consumer relations. [Respondent 6].

Online engagement initiatives like this provide precise impact measurements and a way to predict sales.

Digital technology is better suited for obtaining the maximum result and gives us an immediate reaction from, and dialogue with, the consumer. Moreover, this reaction is always perfectly measurable. [Respondent 2].

However, online engagement generates a shallower bond: online technology is superficial and does not involve all five senses but only sight and hearing. Consumers' exposure to content is minimal, so online engagement must be immediate and fast.

In the online context, we need content that can create engagement in a few seconds as consumers have a very short attention span, and there is an overflow of content from competitors. In fact, the content brands propose on the net is very broad-ranging, so an image, a video, and what it is intended to communicate must be able to catch the attention of the consumer in just a few seconds […]. There is a vast difference between online and offline engagement, which is mainly based on the type of content, the level of consumer attention, and the time consumers dedicate to the brand […]. Digital engagement is much easier to measure, for example, through social platforms, applications, web pages, the insights behind all the content that appears online. [Respondent 1].

However, the technological complexity of these initiatives and the capillary action typical of the online world can make any type of content published online go viral.

Until the pre-digital era, there was no traceable relationship between communication and sales. Communication was sent out, and sales were observed, but it was impossible to understand whether sales resulted from good communication on the radio, TV, direct marketing, etc.: you only had an overall result. Using digital communication, this uncertainty is eliminated. Each activity provides an opportunity for impressions, clicks, leads, or sales. Therefore, using only digital tools in each phase, information on the performance of each activity and the CPI of each tool used is immediately available. [Respondent 5].

Offline engagement entails a deferred reaction and does not allow the consumer to engage in conversation with the brand: any conversation is only one way. Offline engagement does not allow companies to create customised campaigns, leaving only the massive campaign option available. The impact of offline engagement on sales is difficult to measure; however, it is possible to measure its effects on brand awareness in the long term. The human-based offline approach goes deeper and involves all the senses. Initiatives of this kind are more effective as the consumer is exposed to the product /brand/firm for longer, creating a strong impact on the individual.

> Once the consumer has decided to approach the brand offline, the brand personnel in the store has more time to converse with him, and more complex conversations can be activated […]. Offline engagement initiatives are less complex than online engagement and do not create virality. [Respondent 1]. Today, digital transformation has accelerated, facilitated, and perfected the process of creating a relationship with a brand, above all simplifying the contact between consumer and brand. [Respondent 6].

In the long term, the company seeks to apply an integrated cross-holistic system of CBE to "customer life". It is a 360-degree engagement-management system regardless of the context. CBE is currently based on a system that combines high-tech online approaches (and quantitative measurements) with high-touch and human-based offline approaches (using qualitative information from stores or channels).

> Today, online and offline must converge to create customer experience; these two environments must become mutually complementary. [Respondent 1]. The approach to communication must be transversal across all media; there will no longer be online and offline communication, as they call it today, but it will be "onlife", so engagement becomes part of every moment of the life of both consumer and brand. [Respondent 2].

6. The sixth dimension that emerged from the study refers to the relationship between *CBE and brand identity*.

CBE must be consistent with brand and consumer values; otherwise, it may generate negative engagement.

> Firms like Nike and Apple can create emotional and aspirational engagement, creating a world of values, perceptions and sensations that persuade the consumer to marry into the brand and its cultural universe. Obviously, there will always be a product of the highest quality behind it. In these cases, the consumer first chooses the brand—and his or her cultural universe is linked to it—before choosing the product. [Respondent 4].

CBE initiatives aspire to the co-creation of brand values or brand identity, as well as the creation of instant value for the consumer.

Every commercial choice becomes a part of the engagement that allows you to work on the creation of brand identity. On the contrary, if the brand lacks a clear identity, engagement will represent an operation functional to creating instant value. [Respondent 2].

Brand entertainment activities work when the brand promotes content that represents the values shared by the consumer. [Respondent 5].

We are trying to create an emotional bond with today's consumers by presenting and stimulating the brand's values, ideas, opinions, and thoughts with which consumers can identify. [Respondent 4].

7. The seventh and last dimension refers to the *relationship funnel between brand and consumer*.

Awareness, consideration, conversion, loyalty, and advocacy represent the various steps in the marketing funnel, namely, different levels of brand engagement.

The activities that the firm can put in place to create an emotional bond with the consumer have a strictly operational role, despite being included in a strategic process. They are therefore part of the final step in making marketing decisions. [Respondent 2].

According to the marketing funnel model, you first create an emotional bond with the brand and then try to achieve the performance objectives. [Respondent 5].

CBE is a superordinate construct. Engagement is everything that falls within the sphere of emotional attachment between consumer, brand, and/or product connected with an online and/or offline experience. [Respondent 1].

Engagement is an umbrella covering every branding and communication activity, but there are also a series of activities that specifically aim to bring it about. Together with customer care, institutional and value communication are the main forms of customer engagement. [Respondent 2].

6 General discussion

In trying to answer the research question, this article has contributed also to clarifying what is meant by *"new construct positioning in the marketing literature"*. As emerged from the empirical studies, a concept is clearly positioned in the literature if the following requirements are simultaneously present: (a) a clear definition and conceptualisation of the construct; (b) even if there is no univocal measurement scale in the literature, there must nevertheless be clarity at least as regards the determinants of the construct, the manifest variables that allow the construct to be operationalised, and the consequences in terms of other outcome variables that the construct itself can influence; (c) there must be no overlap between the construct and others already found in the literature, but the new construct may be superordinated to previous ones or relate to them; and (d) the construct must be compatible

with different marketing theories (i.e. SDL, GDL, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), etc.). Otherwise, we would have to admit that marketing has become a woolly and highly subjective discipline from which we may pick the most personally congenial theory.

The findings of the two empirical studies (Study 1 and Study 3) make it possible to deduce that, for theoretical, conceptual, and empirical reasons, CBE is still far from obtaining definitive recognition among marketing scholars, and it frequently conflicts—depending on the definition attributed to it—with several pre-existing constructs found in marketing theory. In addition, the determinants, focus, and outcome variables usable for implementing CBE are unclear. An examination of the findings of both studies, interpreting the relationships between their respective findings, provides some discussion points, as follows.

"Emerging theme 3" (*CBE conceptualisation in marketing literature*) from Study 2 highlights the challenge of conceptualising CBE. This difficulty is reflected in the main area requiring deeper study in the complementary analysis regarding the informants and has highlighted just how unclear the positioning of the topic is within the literature, bringing to the fore the grey areas currently surrounding dimensions *from 1 to 7 in empirical Study1*. Several topics may thus be distinguished.

The first discussion point might be defined as *"the search for systematisation in marketing and brand theory"*. This discussion point ties in particularly well with the research question: *what is the current positioning of CBE in marketing theory?*

As the interviews with the key informants (scholars) clearly show, CBE is rapidly becoming positioned in the literature and is being approached according to the tenets of positivist culture. Analysis of the literature (Study 2) indicates that CBE has principally been conceptualised from an SDL perspective and, in more general terms, service theory, before extending to other theoretical perspectives. CBE, as often happens in the development and dissemination of new concepts in literature, initially generated a broad-ranging theoretical discussion vis-à-vis a definition and later focused on aspects of implementation and measurement. The academic community seeks to assess the consistency of the constructs progressively emerging in literature in a general overall framework. The difficulty of positioning CBE is meaningful in this sense and reflects the controversial infancy of the CBE construct. This consideration emerges from the meaning of *"emerging theme 3"* (*CBE conceptualisation in marketing literature*) as it emerges from Study 2; *"dimension 1"* (*the social and/or individual nature of CBE*), *"dimension 2"* (*the overlap of CBE with other constructs*), *"dimension 6"* (*the link between CBE and SDL*), and *"dimension 7"* (*the value or functional nature of CBE*) emerging from empirical Study 1, involving authoritative CBE scholars. To date, it cannot be said that the concept of CBE has been adopted in the different mainstream perspectives, nor that there is uniform recognition of the phenomenon. *"Emerging dimensions 1, 2, 6, and 7"* which emerge from Study 1, focusing on the academic community, highlight that the problem of clear conceptualisation is even more complex. They raise an epistemological problem relating to the different meanings of the term from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. It would therefore be appropriate to go back and (re)define the concept in depth using qualitative research techniques from a broader theoretical perspective. Lastly, as suggested by *"dimensions 1 and 6"*, it

would seem necessary to consider the existence of an engagement ecosystem of particular importance from the SDL perspective, which concerns not only the brand but also consumers and the community.

The second discussion point might be summarised as *"distinguishing them"*. This point relates to the research question *how does CBE differ from and overlap other theoretical constructs in marketing literature?*

The unusual position of CBE in the literature means some effort is required to clarify the differences between the concepts of CBE, BE and CBI (*"emerging dimension 2"*, overlaps with engagement and other constructs), and the concept of loyalty—*"emerging dimension 3" (the multidimensionality of CBE),* both identified in *Study 1*. Equating CBE with loyalty, for instance, can be considered hazardous if one considers that engagement is not always manifested by customers loyal to the brand. This finding is also reflected in the analysis of the interviews with the practitioners. The informants often overlapped the characteristics of CBE with loyalty-management practices, and they were not always able to distinguish between CRM and CBE metrics. Customer engagement towards a brand online might not, in fact, involve customers or former customers who disagree with new management choices regarding the brand (an example might be the negative engagement of Italian "Alfisti" with the Alfa Romeo automotive brand). In fact, a consumer might sometimes be emotionally involved with a brand even without having been a customer. A practitioner confirmed this by clarifying that consumers can direct engagement towards the brand albeit with no consideration regarding the product. In other words, consumers can engage with either the brand, the brand and the product, or the brand, the product, and other consumers. This is an exceptional situation: a consumer who loves Ferrari and is heavily engaged on the internet and in community events could demonstrate an unbreakable bond with the brand, characterised by values of sportsmanship and cult relevance. Therefore, the affective part of loyalty could be regarded as a premise of CBE. So, as indicated above, attachment and love rather than overall loyalty (affective and behavioural premises) are the true premises underlying CBE.

Furthermore, there are marked differences between CBE and value co-creation, which is often triggered by firms that devise more concrete tools for customer involvement in components of brand equity. Not infrequently, the customer is involved in optimising/improving the offer system or, more rarely, in producing innovative ideas. In this case, the company takes a leading role in the innovation process by providing the tools and skills whereby the consumer's contribution can positively impact brand equity.

Customer brand involvement (CBI) is very close to the concept of co-creation as it is related to a firm's initiatives to involve customers in the process of generating new knowledge, which can serve to improve or optimise the offer system. In this sense, CBI can sometimes also be considered a tool for acquiring new customers. Companies may devise strategies such as "gamification", contests, events, or video entertainment, to involve consumers, attracting them to the brand or allowing them to produce user-generated content. The interviews with CBE practitioners were particularly important in this regard. CBE always originates in the consumer's mind. However, it is rarely a spontaneous condition arising from the customer's

emotional, affective, or sentimental involvement with the brand. The practitioners underlined that consumers often spontaneously engage with iconic brands with no inducement to do so. Of course, the brand could later offer (offline and online) advantages to reinforce or improve relationships with engaging customers. CBE always implies a conscious decision by the customer or consumer to this effect, but, for consumer goods, an inducement is often required to activate it. However, it is always voluntary, in line with the broad definition of Actor Engagement Behaviour (AEB) proposed by Alexander et al. (2018, p. 336): "an actor's voluntary resource contributions that focus on the engagement object go beyond what is elementary to the exchange, and occur in interactions with a focal object and/or other actors'. Essentially, an engaged actor is willing to invest a broad range of resources—such as time, money, information, labor—with a focus on the focal engagement object (e.g. a product, brand), and these resource contributions occur through specific, interactive engagement behaviors".

Customer experience (CE), as mentioned by some informants in Study 1 (*"dimension 4"*: *the interactivity and dynamism of CBE*, and *"dimension 5"*: *the spontaneous and/or induced nature of CBE*). Both dimensions denote a temporary situation of consumer participation in the brand. CE can therefore address one or more exchange situations. Otherwise, CBE would equate to a lasting bond with a brand, which the customer, who is not necessarily a consumer, presents to the outside world. Furthermore, as the practitioners clarified, customer experience has a more functional and cognitive nature than CBE, which is more affective and emotional, except in the case of consumer goods, regarding which it is more often of a functional or cognitive nature.

After mining the topic, some of these considerations have also been found in the content of *"emerging theme 3"* (*CBE conceptualisation in marketing literature*) in Study 2 (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2011; Gambetti et al., 2012).

The third discussion point might be defined as *"the search for coherence in consumer-brand relationship theory"*. This point is inherent to the following research question: *what are the antecedents and consequences of engagement in a consumer-brand relationship?*

The scholars interviewed stressed the importance of seeking coherence between CBE and the consumer-brand relationship ("*dimension 2"*: *the overlap between engagement and other constructs, and* "*dimension 5"*: *the spontaneous and/or induced nature of CBE*). Some of these considerations have been found in the contents of *"emerging theme 3"* (*CBE conceptualisation in marketing literature*) of Study 2. In fact, some authors (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2011; Gambetti et al., 2012) have investigated this aspect and proposed a distinction between the two concepts (brand attachment and CBE).

CBE should be considered an outcome of brand love. This is mainly true for iconic or experiential products and services. Engagement acquires a more functional or cognitive nature for large consumer goods because the consumer has a more pragmatic relationship with the brand. Lastly, both kinds of product and service firms benefit greatly from engagement related to customer care and service levels. Indeed, we suggest it may be possible to claim that for iconic and experiential products and services, there is a life cycle in the relationship between the consumer and the brand,

following a series of phases. The customer is emotionally involved with a brand that, naturally, has a fascinating experiential identity. As the brand reinforces its ability to enthral the consumer, the latter may experience brand attachment. This attachment grows over time due to constant confidence and trust by the consumer in the ability of the brand to emotionally involve him or her. Within a reasonable time, the perception of equity may lead the consumer to fall in love with the brand. A further condition is required for CBE to occur: in addition to the cognitive-affective state of mind, there must be a clear behavioural manifestation of the consumer's relationship with the brand. Only after this stage will the consumer be considered inseparably linked to the brand. Some studies quoted above show that engagement derives from a relationship between the brand and the consumer following a rational decision. This open relationship, in which other actors are involved, could have a social impact. In addition, these empirical studies demonstrate the existence of the negative side of engagement. Engagement is a "promise" following a rational decision. The consumer may decide to commit "for" (positive engagement) or "against" (negative engagement) a brand. According to the practitioners interviewed, CBE must be consistent with the values and identity of the brand; otherwise, it will produce adverse effects. If positive, CBE can be a real aid to building a solid and coherent brand identity. Lastly, loyalty becomes a bidirectional attitude within the brand community.

A high level of engagement generates loyalty, and a very loyal consumer has greater chances of developing engagement with the brand. In fact, CBE has two distinctive features compared with other brand relationship constructs. The first involves a rational decision by consumers who explicitly "communicate" to the brand and other consumers that they are inextricably linked to it. This is clearly different from other brand feelings constructs. In terms of emotional bonding, attachment, and brand love, CBE is underpinned by the premise that the consumer has an affective, cognitive, and sentimental relationship with a brand, but in this case, this condition might not be known externally. The brand or other customers cannot be aware of this condition unless a specific study aimed at understanding the nature and intensity of this involvement is carried out. Unlike with CBE, customers explicitly or implicitly show society, other customers, and the brand itself that they have decided to establish a bond.

On the other hand, the second key feature of CBE that distinguishes it from other constructs is inherent to the very nature of the involvement. Here, the customer uses the tools provided by new technologies and social media to contribute to a specific brand's values and symbolic and cultural meanings. In addition, compared with co-creation, there is a higher level of involvement in the means-end chain of the brand.

The managers interviewed also highlighted a strong correlation between CBE and the life cycle of any relationship with consumers (the consumer journey and marketing funnel). For some, CBE is more important during the launch of new products, as well as for large consumer goods and during loyalty-building for luxury or highly experiential goods. For some other practitioners, all the marketing funnel stages are essential for potential customer engagement. This implies, therefore, that CBE is a superordinate construct overarching all other relational constructs with the consumer.

As for the advancement of research on this topic, it is possible to distinguish two strands beyond the initial definition phase. The first is related to the theory of customer disengagement in service ecosystems, and the second regards the deepening of consumer brand engagement via digital technologies. More specifically, concerning this last point, it has been possible to identify a form of CBE induced or initiated in a digital context based on engagement behaviour that the consumer proactively develops towards the brand, again in the digital context and, especially, on social media.

The fourth discussion point concerns the elective context in which firms adopt engagement initiatives, perhaps the same as those in which CBE measuring models proposed by the researchers are frequently assessed, given the lower consumer contact costs. This point might be defined as *"the search for a clear distinction or a separation in marketing literature"*. The findings of Study 2 show that it is possible to identify a form of digital engagement initiated by the firm (*"emerging theme 2"*) and an engagement behaviour initiated by the consumer. The latter results from a development in the consumer-brand relationship, facilitated and made more effective by the digital context. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the "third transversal theme" in Study 2 concerns the actor initiating the engagement process. Furthermore, in Study 1, *CB "dimension 5": the spontaneous and/or induced nature of CBE"* represents the same distinguishing dimension that emerges from a deeper examination of the key sentences and to which future efforts at theoretical systematisation should be addressed. It is one thing to speak of short-term and changeable engagement activated or initiated by the brand and generally taking advantage of the opportunities offered by new digital technologies. This form of engagement often takes the form of digital promotional initiatives: gamification, contests, and user-generated content, commonly measured using the usual indicators (of involvement) available on social media (impression, likes, comments, sharing). Quite another matter is long-term spontaneous and stable customer engagement with the brand, which requires lengthy evolution over time and depends on its ability to assume highly symbolic and cultural significance in the consumer's life, later rewarded with a stable, long-lasting, and loyal relationship. In this case, the trigger for spontaneous customer engagement might be initiated by the brand to reinforce customer engagement over time.

In the future, an interpretation will emerge that will clarify the conceptualisation of CBE, distinguishing it from other constructs and giving it a sustainable positioning in the marketing literature. Otherwise, it will most probably be destined to remain confined to managerial practice but synonymous with the consumer's response to involvement initiatives mainly undertaken by companies online. One of the main findings from the interviews with practitioners is the context-dependent nature of CBE. Online CBE is immediate and can be initiated by the consumer. It is measurable, customisable, and able to influence sales in a direct and sometimes measurable way. Offline CBE, on the other hand, is more difficult to put into practice and requires consumer engagement strategies, especially at points of sale. It is less superficial, unlikely to be initiated by the customer alone or on the spot, and has a strong human factor. Offline CBE is longer lasting, but its impact on sales is difficult to measure. In any case, managerial and consulting practice pose a future challenge

requiring a holistic approach to CBE, uniting on- and offline actions and measures to implement "on-life CBE" for the consumer.

Lastly, it may be helpful to offer a slightly marginal consideration to the discussion. Regarding customer disengagement, it emerged distinctly from the studies that one of the recent theoretical advances in the literature on CBE cannot, in our opinion, be accepted as distinctive. In fact, as amply stated in the discussions mentioned above, CBE has not been clearly conceptualised and lacks distinctive positioning in the marketing literature and is therefore not seen as an effective yardstick for managerial purposes. Consequently, it is hard to understand how such a contribution to the theorisation of disengagement can be considered accepted and precise, given that CBE is not yet fully consolidated.

The *fifth point of discussion* can be defined as *"the search for a clear definition of the engagement construct"*. This point is consistent with the following research question: *what are the antecedents and consequences of engagement in the consumer-brand relationship?*

7 Conclusions

According to our reasoning, there is a fundamental difference between CBE and all the other theoretical perspectives that consider the consumer a co-creator of value. In effect, the co-creation process is grounded in conscious and induced co-operation between firms and consumers that interact through their operant resources (skills, knowledge, competencies) to co-create value around brands. It is the brand that stimulates the customer to co-operate, employing selected mechanisms. CBE, however, is mainly a form of "voluntary" consumer involvement with a firm's brands, products, and/or services, independently (or not) of any action on the brand's part. The main difference between brand engagement and brand involvement is not the spontaneous nature of the former versus the induced nature of the latter but the nature of the co-creation process. In fact, engagement is a predominantly emotional phenomenon, except for consumer products, regarding which—strictly speaking—one cannot even talk about engagement as the consumer becomes involved in predominantly rational and functional aspects. Brand involvement is mainly induced by the company and always concerns the functional and pragmatic aspects of co-creation (the product, service, and innovation process). Engagement is significant for highly experiential and particularly involving products. Among these, iconic brands play an important role: they can stimulate wholly spontaneous forms of involvement also thanks to the growing opportunities for interaction offered by the internet. On the overlap and confusion regarding the distinction between CBE and CBI, see Cheung et al. (2020), who claim that the two constructs are often used interchangeably in literature and managerial practice but that involvement encompasses the cognitive and affective dimensions; it may also be situational or enduring. Customer engagement is almost always voluntary in terms of aspects relating to brand content and meanings.

Instead, being mainly supported by a firm, consumer involvement has its antecedent in the customers' brand loyalty, which arises from the trust derived from

customer satisfaction. CBE and consumer collaboration work on four conceptual brand interacting blocks (BIBLOs), organised in pyramidal order to represent practice spaces where the actors (brand and/or customers) actively participate in creating value and brand equity. From the consumer perspective, and progressing from the bottom up, these BIBLOs are as follows: (a) performing operational activities related to components of current products (i.e. ready-for-use product assembly) or services (i.e. product delivering; e-ticketing; etc.) or a mixture of the two (i.e. setting up a PC configuration; creating a holiday package), closely designed by the company and not modifiable by consumers; (b) improving the brand-offering system (product, service, and experience related), which provides added value in terms of benefits (functional and psychosocial) and attributes (tangible and intangible) for consumers; (c) innovating the brand-offering system (product, service, experience related); (d) defining the core brand values and meanings, which concerns the deep-rooted elements of brand equity in cultural terms (symbols, images, texts, codes, meanings, etc.) and affect (feelings, judgements, personality, history, heritage, experiences, etc.). Consumer collaboration is generally induced and designed by the companies and takes place in all the BIBLOs. On the other hand, the consumer spontaneously promotes engagement, which might evolve into collaboration mainly at a later stage. Therefore, consumers with feelings of engagement towards a brand can have a collaborative role only when recognised and induced by the company and when the correct processes to enable this co-operation are deployed. However, when consumers strongly dissent from the brand's values or the managerial approach of its owner, and, therefore, the choices concerning a product and/or service that radically transform the rooted cultural and affective elements of a brand, engagement takes the form of resilience, conflict, and resistance. This could lead to the formation of "anti-brand communities" (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006), "alter-brand communities", or "counter-brand communities" (Cova & White, 2010).

This explorative study has highlighted the differences between the CBE construct and similar ones, such as brand love, brand attachment, and brand involvement. The results highlight substantial differences among the theoretical constructs regarding the active consumer-brand relationship. Brand love, brand attachment, and brand experience have different meanings within the concept of CBE. A sequential process connects constructs through the following nodes: brand experience, brand attachment, brand love, and brand engagement, mainly concerning luxury and experiential goods. For consumer products, it might be more appropriate to speak of 'brand involvement', as the customer is more reluctant to be involved, and what happens is temporary and functional, concerning activities with low added value for the brand. It emerges that the common ground between co-creation from the SDL perspective and CBE is active consumer involvement in the brand equity co-creation process. However, the nature and characteristics of this involvement differ in terms of co-creation and consumer engagement. The key point of the discussion is that in the early phase of the customer-brand relationship, engagement is spontaneous and is neither stimulated nor designed by the company, as happens with co-creation (the brand-customer relationship). Thus, CBE might move in the direction of co-creation only at a later stage.

Our research highlights the degree of overlapping by marketing scholars on the concept of engagement, its antecedents, focus, and outcome variables: 364 variables were isolated in the 64 articles, 198 of which were considered antecedent variables, 73 target (or focus) variables, and 93 pertained to outcome. Thus, the analysis highlights that several authors consider some variables (customer satisfaction, brand attachment, brand involvement, brand love, loyalty, brand experience, purchase, etc.) to be antecedents, while others treat them as focus variables or outcomes. Some models emerge from research exploring the determinants of engagement, while other studies seek to test a suggested overall scale-measurement model; otherwise, they are simply confirmatory. Others again aim to measure brand engagement in a specific research context, adopting a particular scale-measurement model.

Lastly, this work provides intuitive input regarding the potential role of CBE in the advancement of the most extensive theoretical perspectives of relationship marketing in line with SD logic and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), focusing on the importance of establishing and maintaining an interactive and co-creative exchange-relationship between the consumer and the brand.

8 Limitations and future developments

One of the main limitations of this article is the solely qualitative nature of its empirical research. In addition, it must be emphasised that the findings of these studies depend on whether the informants share the theoretical foundations of SDL. Therefore, it is not possible to discuss normative considerations at this stage. In future, a quantitative phase will be developed based on the central findings of the current qualitative research. This will make it possible to discuss and argue some valuable implications for scholars and practitioners.

The next research plan will be devoted to a quantitative study of the phenomenon based on the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) protocol. Following Maslowska et al. (2016), companies should look beyond return on investment, developing metrics for measuring the impact of marketing communication and engagement strategies on satisfaction, lifetime value, and loyalty, which could, in fact, represent future measurement metrics for ROI. Companies need to experience the impact of engagement on corporate performance if they are to understand what types of engagement have the greatest influence on value growth for engaged customers. Further stages of our study will need to consider the various product categories companies offer as the consumer develops ties based on the relevance of the product/service category offered, so the next step in our research could be an in-depth examination of how *CBE can be measured and by which metrics.*

CBE is generally studied in connection with traditional means of brand communication (Heath, 2009; Wang, 2006), seeking quantitative logic (Bezjian-Avery et al., 1998; Calder et al., 2009; Kilger & Romer, 2007; Sprott et al., 2009). This reveals the opportunity to analyse and understand the determinants and consequences of engagement compared with innovative and unconventional communication contexts (social media and Web 2.0, the urban environment) (Schultz, 2009). In other words, the academic community's emphasis on understanding and measuring consumer

engagement within a traditional communication-research setting has paved the way for a fuller grasp of the significance and implications of CBE. Indeed, CBE is not found in the traditional communications scenarios (e.g. television advertising or in print); instead, it occurs in interactive communication between brand and consumer (i.e. environmental initiatives, social media, gamification, user-generated content). Consequently, another future stage in our research might be to discover how organisations can nurture CBE in these interactive contexts.

Lastly, this work offers intuitive input regarding the potential role of CBE in the advancement of the more extensive theoretical perspectives of relationship marketing in line with SD logic and CCT, focusing on the importance of establishing and maintaining an interactive and co-creative relationship of exchange between the consumer and the brand. One of the principal limitations of this research is, in fact, that the results depend on the respondents' interest in SDL or GDL. Therefore, a third future goal could be to study how CBE can be adapted to competitive theoretical perspectives such as SDL, GDL, and CCT, to mention but a few.

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