

The impact of consumer-brand engagement on brand experience and behavioural intentions

An Italian empirical study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of consumer-brand engagement and brand experience on behavioural intentions (i.e. intent to re-purchase, willingness to accept brand extension, willingness to pay a premium price) in relation to food brands.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors propose a conceptual model comprising five latent variables and 26 manifest variables. A questionnaire with questions relating to pasta and coffee was given to an Italian consumer sample ($n = 400$). The model was tested using structural equation modelling of the resulting data to examine the research hypotheses.

Findings – The empirical study confirms the predictive role of the two selected drivers of brand value. Both consumer-brand engagement and brand experience influenced behavioural intentions, but these brand constructs had different roles in the two product categories examined in the study, pasta and coffee.

Research limitations/implications – This study does have limitations. First, the generalisability of the findings should be considered. The study refers to only two product categories in a specific country. It would be interesting to investigate the issue of food brand engagement and brand experience in different countries, and to compare the results. Furthermore, it would be valuable to investigate the impact of brand engagement and brand experience in other product categories.

Practical implications – The results have an important implication for marketing managers: they should develop long-term and strong brand relationships. Such consumer engagement and/or experiential actions can be key competitive advantages for food companies.

Originality/value – The study provides empirical support for the effect of consumer-brand engagement and brand experience on consumers' behavioural intentions in the food industry.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Coffee, Structural equation modelling, Brand experience, Consumer-brand engagement, Pasta

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In marketing studies, the relationship between consumers and brands is a topic of relevance to both researchers and practitioners. In these terms, the drivers of brand equity include consumer engagement and experience. Many customers enjoy authentic experiences that reflect their desires or current beliefs (Molleda, 2010; Assiouras *et al.*, 2015) related to the symbolic value of products, from which they are able to get pleasure. In sum, they prefer products with which they can identify (Klinger, 1971; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Gambetti *et al.*, 2012).

Several authors have analysed the concept of engagement, although they have tended to adopt rather different definitions and perspectives. Sprott *et al.* (2009) emphasise the role of



engagement in the relationships between consumers and brands; they define the brand engagement self-concept (BESC) as the ability of a brand to reflect a consumer's personal identity. The engagement of a consumer with a brand plays an important role in the consumption experience, since post-modern consumers are likely to buy a product not only for its utilitarian value, but also to enjoy the experience of purchasing and consuming, which in turn is often related to the brand personality (Aaker, 1996; Aaker *et al.*, 2014; Keller and Richey, 2006) and the emotional responses the brand evokes in the consumer (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Zarantonello and Schmitth, 2010; Nejad *et al.*, 2015). Brakus *et al.* (2009) analysed in depth the concept of brand experience, which they defined as consumer responses on sensory, affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions. When consumers have a pleasant or unpleasant experience of a brand, they readily express behavioural reactions, and these responses could have a direct impact on the future behavioural intentions in terms of word of mouth (WOM), re-purchase and willingness to pay a premium price. These relationships are important to better understand consumer needs and to manage customer-based brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993, 2001, 2013). The evidence emerging from these studies is of particular interest to the food industry (Davcik, 2013; Assiouras *et al.*, 2015) because food has a high symbolic value in consumer-brand relationships (Fournier and Yao, 1997, 1998; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of consumer-brand engagement (CBE) and brand experience on behavioural intentions (i.e. intent to re-purchase, willingness to accept brand extension, willingness to pay a premium price) related to food brands. It emphasises the moderator effect of product category on consumer-brand relationships. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a brief background of the literature review concerning brand engagement, brand experience and behavioural intentions. Section 3 presents the conceptual model and our hypotheses. Section 4 shows the methods used to test the hypotheses and Section 5 presents the main findings of the empirical study. Section 6 discusses the outcomes, while the managerial implications, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are presented in Section 7.

2. Literature review

Several studies analysed in depth the role of brand in customer relationship management, focussing attention on the drivers of brand equity (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Keller, 1993, 2001, 2013, 2016; Richards and Jones, 2008; Whan Park *et al.*, 2010). The literature on brand equity is still fragmented and several authors have used different constructs to measure customer-based brand equity (Busacca and Castaldo, 2003; Van Riel *et al.*, 2005; Chen, 2010; Whan Park *et al.*, 2010). Recent studies have focussed on the role of brand and brand equity in successful marketing strategies, adopting a relational perspective (Esch *et al.*, 2006; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). In particular, some studies have focussed on specific drivers of brand value, namely, those that are experience-related (Schmitt, 1999, 2003), trust-related (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001), attachment-related (Thomson *et al.*, 2005) and/or engagement-related (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010; Hollebeek, 2011a). The work on the engagement-related drivers of brand equity has explored the nature and the characteristics of individuals' emotional reactions to brands as antecedent conditions which affect their behavioural intentions (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007). The present work is focussed on the impact on consumers' behavioural intentions of two drivers of brand equity – i.e. CBE and brand experience. The key literature on these constructs is discussed below.

2.1 CBE

The concept of engagement has been recently discussed in the marketing literature (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010; Hollebeek, 2011a; Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010; Gambetti *et al.*, 2012; Dwivedi, 2015). Although in the current literature there is no common definition of this construct, it is considered an important driver in the decision-making process and an

antecedent of brand equity (Bowden, 2009; Sprott *et al.*, 2009; Schultz and Block, 2011). Gambetti *et al.* (2012) reviewed the literature on CBE and underlined that the majority of studies have focussed on the cognitive dimension of the construct CBE that links an individual to a brand (Sprott *et al.*, 2009; Khan *et al.*, 2016). In this perspective, CBE could be defined as a “mental activation process of a consumer towards a brand”. Following this stream, Sprott *et al.* (2009) focussed their study on the BESC and showed that some consumers tend to include particular brands as a part of their self-image. On the other hand, some studies have analysed the affective dimension of CBE, whereby a brand is associated with particular emotional responses on the part of consumers (Heath, 2007; Gambetti *et al.*, 2012) and others on the conative dimension, which reflects a consumer’s behavioural response to a brand (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Verhoef *et al.*, 2010). More recently, some researchers have explored the CBE from an experiential perspective (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011a; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). In particular, Hollebeek (2011a) in a first explorative study conceptualised CBE as comprising three key elements: immersion, passion and activation. Recently, the same author with Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) validated the model through an empirical study in a social media context.

2.2 Brand experience

Engaged consumers play an important role in creating and co-creating experiences, as well as in value (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Schmitt, 2009). Brand experience has been conceptualised in different ways and there is still an uncommon definition in the existing literature (Rageh Ismail *et al.*, 2011). According to Brakus *et al.* (2009), brand experience can be defined as the “sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of brand design and identity, packaging, communications and environments”. Both Zarantonello *et al.* (2007) and Brakus *et al.* (2009) have analysed the consumer responses in terms of their sensory, affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions. Specifically, the sense experience includes aesthetics and sensory qualities, the affective experience consists of moods and emotions, the cognitive experience includes rational and analytical experiences, and finally the behavioural experience refers to actions in relation to a certain brand (Azize *et al.*, 2013). Brand experience is conceptually and empirically related to other constructs, such as brand equity (Risitano *et al.*, 2013; Khan *et al.*, 2016), but is distinct from brand attachment, brand involvement and consumer delight (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010).

The analysis of the brand experience suggests that it has a special relationship with CBE (Calder and Malthouse, 2005; Ferraresi, 2011). Merrilees (2016) measured the impact of interactive brand experience on brand engagement by showing different patterns of engagement and co-creation when comparing more emotional and sensory experience (hedonic brands). Moreover, both CBE and brand experience could be considered as antecedents of behavioural intentions (East *et al.*, 2007; Hong and Yang, 2009). In the dynamic perspective of CBE (Hollebeek, 2011a), the literature shows that consumers who are highly engaged with a brand show positive behavioural intentions.

2.3 Behavioural intentions

In the marketing literature, consumer behavioural intentions (CBIs) are reported to play a key role in brand outcomes (Anselmsson *et al.*, 2007). In fact, behavioural intentions are normally theorised as a kind of customer loyalty, typically measured by the intent to re-purchase and the intent to WOMWOM (East *et al.*, 2007; Hong and Yang, 2009). Belén del Río *et al.* (2001) found evidence that brand associations have a positive influence on consumer choice, preferences and intention of purchase, their willingness to pay a price premium for the brand, to accept brand extensions (i.e. marketing strategy in which a firm uses the same brand in a different product category) and to recommend the brand to others. Dwivedi (2015) found that

once consumers are engaged with brands, these emotive relationships have a direct impact on behavioural intentions in terms of intent to purchase. Others authors have also considered consumers' willingness to pay a premium price (Kadirov, 2015) as a proxy for brand loyalty.

In the food industry, Anselmsson *et al.* (2007) have analysed consumers' willingness to pay a price premium, and found a positive relationship with some brand drivers (i.e. perceived brand awareness, perceived quality, perceived social image and perceived uniqueness). In the restaurant context, previous studies (Jan and Han, 2011; Ryu *et al.*, 2012) analysed the role of perceived price as antecedent of customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions. So, in the study presented here, the behavioural intentions are measured not only in terms of intent to buy (IB), but also in terms of willingness to pay a premium price and willingness to accept a brand extension. According to White and Yu (2005), CBI is considered to be a consequence of both brand experience and CBE (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004; Broyles *et al.*, 2009; Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2012).

3. Conceptual framework

In line with the theoretical assumptions outlined in the previous section, this study uses an original conceptual framework (see Figure 1) to analyse the relationships between CBE, brand experience and intentional behaviours. According to Ferraresi (2011), consumer-brand engagement can create a need without any intention to spend money, while brand experience refers to the consumption context and consumers' perceived stimuli. This approach considers consumers as rational and emotional individuals who are affected cognitively and emotionally by their consumption experience.

Based on this dynamic perspective (Hollebeek, 2011b), the present work emphasises the distinct but related roles of engagement and experience. As the direct impact of CBE on brand experience has been validated in only one study (Khan *et al.*, 2016), this research aims to confirm the link between CBE and brand experience. Based on this last argument, the following hypotheses are formulated (see also Figure 1):

- H1. CBE has a positive impact on brand experience.
- H2a. CBE has a positive impact on intention to buy.

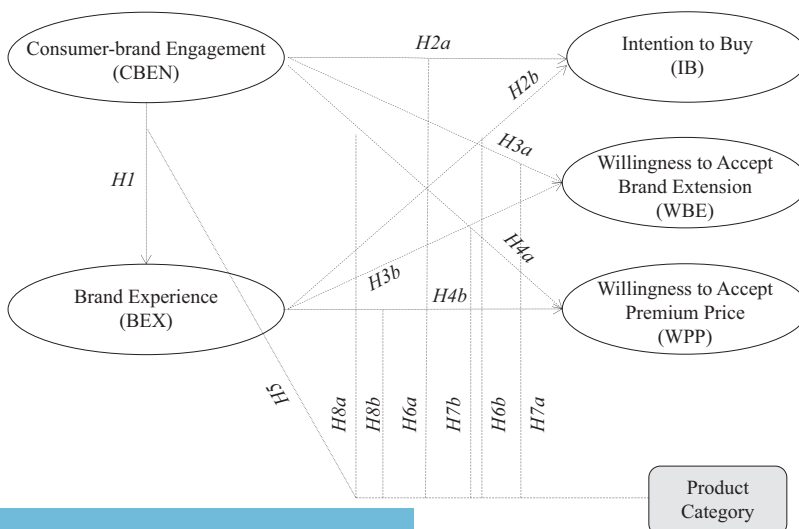


Figure 1.
The proposal
conceptual framework

- H2b.* Brand experience has a positive impact on intention to buy.
- H3a.* CBE has a positive impact on willingness to accept a brand extension.
- H3b.* Brand experience has a positive impact on willingness to accept a brand extension.
- H4a.* CBE has a positive impact on willingness to accept a premium price.
- H4b.* Brand experience has a positive impact on willingness to accept a premium price.

In addition, in the analysis a second step was developed to examine the role of product category as a moderating factor in the relationships between CBE, brand experience and behavioural intentions. This was done to test some further hypotheses:

- H5.* Product category moderates the effect of brand engagement on brand experience.
- H6a.* Product category moderates the effect of brand engagement on intention to buy.
- H6b.* Product category moderates the effect of brand experience on intention to buy.
- H7a.* Product category moderates the effect of brand engagement on willingness to accept a brand extension.
- H7b.* Product category moderates the effect of brand experience on willingness to accept a brand extension.
- H8a.* Product category moderates the effect of brand engagement on willingness to accept a premium price.
- H8b.* Product category moderates the effect of brand experience on willingness to accept a premium price.

4. Methodology

The study was carried out through a survey of 400 consumers in the province of Naples (Italy) in January-February 2013. Stratified sampling based on demographic variables (gender and age) was conducted. Interviews were administered face-to-face. The first question on the survey was a filter that selected consumers of coffee and pasta. The questionnaire also contained items that are not of relevance to this paper.

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with statements on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 5 strong agreement.

Brand experience (BEX) was measured by a shortened version of the brand experience scale (11 of the 12 items were included) (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2007), while consumer – brand engagement (CBEN) was measured using the BESC scale (eight items) (Sprott *et al.*, 2009). Instead, IB, willingness to accept premium price (WPP) and willing to accept brand extension (WBE) were measured using a scale based on two items for each construct (Belén del Río *et al.*, 2001; East *et al.*, 2007; Broyles *et al.*, 2009). Note that brand experience is a second-order construct, i.e. a construct that involves more than one dimension (Wetzels *et al.*, 2009); it is a higher-order construct composed of four lower-order latent variables, sense, feel, think, act.

SEM were used to assess the hypotheses. In the SEM framework, the relations among the latent concepts define the structural model, while those between each latent variable and its corresponding block of items define the measurement model. Among the different approaches to SEM, partial least squares (PLS) is the one used, which is also known as PLS path modelling (Tenenhaus *et al.*, 2005). This is a component-based estimation technique that provides an estimate of the latent variables in such a way that they are the most correlated to each other and the most representative of each corresponding block of

manifest variables. It is also a very flexible approach with no measurement, distributional or sample size assumptions; hence it is well suited to the analysis of phenomena where human judgement is influential, for example, in surveys.

5. Results

The study produced 400 questionnaires from adult consumers 51 per cent female and 49 per cent male. In terms of age, 19.5 per cent of the respondents were between 15 and 24 years of age, 20.5 per cent between 25 and 34, 22.5 per cent between 35 and 44, 21 per cent between 45 and 54, and the rest 55 or above.

The assessment of the measurement models requires analysis of the indicators' reliability, internal consistency (composite reliability (CR)), convergent validity (average variance extracted (AVE)) and discriminant validity.

Examining the standardised loadings to measure the correlation between the manifest variables and the related latent variable assessed the reliability of the indicators. Table I shows that all indicators but WPP1 (removed) were highly correlated with the respective constructs and statistically significant (the significance is evaluated by the 95 per cent bootstrap confidence intervals).

The CR and the AVE indices were calculated to assess the reliability of the constructs. Values of both indices were for almost all the constructs above the cut-off values of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively. The CR values show that the constructs were homogeneous and AVE values show that they captured on average 71, 38, 73, 64 and 100 per cent (only one indicator) of the variance of their indicators in relation to the amount of variance caused by measurement error. The construct BEX had the lowest AVE (0.38), but this is quite common for a second-order construct.

Construct	Indicator	Standardized loading	Lower bound (95%)	Upper bound (95%)	CR	AVE
CBEN	CBEN1	0.68	0.61	0.74	0.95	0.71
	CBEN2	0.86	0.82	0.89		
	CBEN3	0.88	0.84	0.91		
	CBEN4	0.89	0.86	0.91		
	CBEN5	0.88	0.84	0.90		
	CBEN6	0.88	0.85	0.91		
	CBEN7	0.85	0.80	0.88		
	CBEN8	0.83	0.78	0.87		
BEX	BEX1	0.64	0.57	0.69	0.87	0.38
	BEX2	0.73	0.67	0.78		
	BEX3	0.63	0.57	0.69		
	BEX4	0.73	0.66	0.78		
	BEX5	0.56	0.49	0.63		
	BEX6	0.68	0.60	0.74		
	BEX7	0.68	0.61	0.74		
	BEX8	0.57	0.48	0.65		
	BEX9	0.50	0.41	0.58		
	BEX10	0.53	0.44	0.61		
	BEX11	0.51	0.40	0.61		
IB	IB1	0.81	0.69	0.95	0.85	0.73
	IB2	0.90	0.76	0.97		
WBE	WBE1	0.80	0.57	0.94	0.78	0.64
	WBE2	0.80	0.57	0.94		
WPP	WPP1	/	/	/	1	1
	WPP2	1	1	1		

Table I.
Results summary for
measurement model

Table II shows that the various constructs had satisfactory discriminant validity. In fact, the values on the main diagonal (in italic type) correspond to the square root of the AVE and are always greater than the construct inter-correlations in the model (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Once the measurement model has been validated, the next step is to analyse the hypotheses about causal relations and their fit measures. The path coefficients are shown in Table III together with the percentile estimate of the 95 per cent bootstrap confidence intervals and the R^2 values.

Results reveal that $H1$ is supported since the path coefficient is significant, i.e. CBEN can be considered an antecedent which influences BEX. Among the antecedents of IB, CBEN has a significant coefficient, thus supporting $H2a$, whereas $H2b$ is not confirmed, as the coefficient is low and not statistically significant. The WBE construct has the same relationship as IB with its predictors: a significant path from CBEN but not a significant one from BEX. Thus, $H3a$ is supported but $H3b$ is not supported. Finally, both $H4a$ and $H4b$ are supported, implying that WPP is equally influenced by CBEN and BEX.

To test the hypothesis that product category moderates the various causal relations postulated in the model (see Figure 1), the SEM was analysed through multi-group analysis. For this purpose, the overall sample could be divided into two groups, according to whether the respondents were consumers of coffee ($n=200$) or pasta consumers ($n=200$). The significance of path differences is evaluated by a distribution-free approach based on a permutation test procedure (Chin and Dibbern, 2010), where the hypotheses to be tested are: H_0 , parameters are not significantly different; H_a , parameters are significantly different.

Table IV shows that there was a significant difference between the coffee and pasta groups in the relationships CBEN→BEX, BEX→IB, BEX→WPP, CBEN→WPP. In particular, all path coefficients are greater for the pasta group than for the coffee group, except for the relation CBEN→WPP, where the coffee group has a higher coefficient.

We can conclude that our findings support the hypothesised moderating role of product category on the relations between CBEN and BEX ($H5$), BEX and IB ($H6b$), BEX and WPP ($H8b$) and CBEN and WPP ($H8a$).

Note also that the global fit of the model for the product category pasta ($Gof = 0.49$) is greater than that of the two product categories combined ($Gof = 0.45$) (Tenenhaus *et al.*, 2004),

Table II.
Fornell-Larker
criterion

	CBEN	BEX	IB	WBE	WPP
CBEN	<i>0.84</i>				
BEX	0.48	<i>0.62</i>			
IB	0.20	0.15	<i>0.85</i>		
WBE	0.23	0.12	0.26	<i>0.80</i>	
WPP	0.34	0.35	0.17	0.21	Single-item construct

Table III.
Results summary for
the structural model

Research hypothesis	Path coefficient	Lower bound 95%	Upper bound 95%	R^2	Conclusion
$H1$: CBEN → BEX	0.48	0.41	0.55	0.23	Supported
$H2a$: CBEN → IB	0.17	0.07	0.26	0.04	Supported
$H2b$: BEX → IB	0.06	-0.07	0.17		Not supported
$H3a$: CBEN → WBE	0.23	0.10	0.31	0.05	Supported
$H3b$: BEX → WBE	0.01	-0.08	0.11		Not supported
$H4a$: CBEN → WPP	0.23	0.11	0.34	0.16	Supported
$H4b$: BEX → WPP	0.24	0.13	0.33		Supported

as it improves the predictive ability of the various constructs: BEX ($R^2 = 0.37$), IB ($R^2 = 0.07$) and WP ($R^2 = 0.23$). On the other hand, it worsens the overall fit for the coffee model, as the predictive power decreases of the constructs BEX ($R^2 = 0.14$) and WPP ($R^2 = 0.12$).

6. Discussion

Consumer behaviour related to food products is different from that in other categories of consumption because the symbolic value of food is embedded in people's behaviour from childhood (Olivero and Russo, 2009). So, food could be considered the main relational product because it satisfies not only the need for nutrition but also the desire to socialise, to know different cultures, and so on. Moreover, from a psychological perspective, there is a symbolic relationship between food and self-identity. For those reasons, consumers want to play an active role in the consumption process. They want to co-create brand content, to build their identities, express themselves creatively, socialise with other consumers and enjoy customised experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Fabris, 2003; Calder and Malthouse, 2005). This research seeks to extend previous research on consumer behaviour in the specific context of food products, by examining the effects of CBE and BEX on consumers' behavioural intentions, thereby making an important empirical contribution to the marketing theory. In particular, the study demonstrates that CBE is an antecedent of BEX, showing a positive relationship; moreover, CBE is also an antecedent of intention to buy. Finally, CBE is also an important antecedent to willingness to accept a brand extension and the willingness to a premium price. In this research, the construct of BEX has a significant relationship only with willingness to accept a premium price. The second part of the analysis provides empirical support for product category moderating behavioural intentions on food brands, highlighting that the product category significantly influences purchase intention, willingness to pay more and willingness to accept a brand extension.

In the pasta group, all path coefficients were greater than in the coffee group, except for the relationship between CBE and willingness to pay a premium price, where the coffee group had a higher coefficient than the pasta group. Coffee and pasta are perhaps the best-known Italian products worldwide. For Italian people they are perhaps simply part of daily life but pasta is might be considered a more functional product than coffee.

Coffee has a high symbolic value because of its association with breaks, energy, friends and the home. For these reasons, there is a high engagement between people and coffee brand. This is supported by the positive relationship between BEX and willingness to pay a premium price, because it underlines the importance of the food product design, based on sensory, affective and cognitive elements.

7. Conclusion, limitations and future research

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the impact of CBE and BEX on behavioural intentions (i.e. intent to re-purchase, willingness to accept brand extension, willingness to

Research hypothesis	Overall	Coffee	Pasta	diff. abs	p-value	Conclusion
H5: CBEN → BEX	0.48	0.38	0.61	0.23	0.01	Supported
H6a: CBEN → IB	0.17	0.21	0.09	0.12	0.34	Not supported
H6b: BEX → IB	0.06	-0.05	0.20	0.25	0.05	Supported
H7a: CBEN → WBE	0.23	0.29	0.16	0.13	0.28	Not supported
H7b: BEX → WBE	0.01	0.02	0.08	0.06	0.67	Not supported
H8a: CBEN → WPP	0.23	0.28	0.07	0.21	0.10	Moderately supported
H8b: BEX → WPP	0.24	0.13	0.43	0.31	0.02	Supported
Gof	0.45	0.42	0.49			

Notes: Supported ($p < 0.05$); moderately supported ($p < 0.10$)

Table IV.
The moderating role
of product category
(coffee vs pasta)

pay a premium price) related to food brands, as well as any potential moderating effect of product category on consumer-brand relationships. Five hypotheses have been confirmed about causal relations and four in the analysis of the moderating effect of product category, providing interesting findings on the value drivers for food brand consumer analysis.

This study does have limitations. First, the generalisability of the findings should be considered. The study refers to only two product categories in a specific country. It would be interesting to investigate the issue of food brand engagement and BEX in different countries, and to compare the results. Furthermore, it would be valuable to investigate the impact of brand engagement and BEX in other product categories. Moreover, for future studies might be interesting to test the same relationships through a comparative study between a mainstream and a niche market. The use of the technology in designing the consumption experience might be also an important component to evaluate the moderating effect of consumer-brand engagement.

The impact of CBE on BEX and the important role of both the constructs as antecedents of behavioural intentions might have some managerial implications. Marketing managers should take into consideration the fact that brand engagement is an antecedent of the BEX, to improve their brand engagement in order to attract new consumers and to keep existing ones. This is extremely important now that brands compete not only for consumers' loyalty but also for the various affective relationships, such as emotional attachment (Assiouras *et al.*, 2015). The example of brand extensions is representative of how important the notion of brand engagement can be in decisions on whether to expand a brand to new food product categories. Moreover, results put in evidence the critical role of the consumer response to the marketing stimulus. By monitoring the consumer engagement and experience with the brands, companies should measure the gap between the "push strategies" and the "market responses". Coherently, companies may improve the policy or the relationships post-purchase. As showing by the positive relationship with the behavioural intentions, positive or negative BEX may also affect the electronic WOM, by influencing the virtual community. This last issue seems to be interesting to be evaluated in a future research.

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