The Grounded Theory approach to consumer–brand engagement

The practitioner’s standpoint

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Since currently there is no established, unitary and shared theory on consumer–brand engagement (CBE), this exploratory study is aimed at inductively proposing a preliminary conceptual framework of CBE disclosing the knowledge embedded in marketing practice. Our study is designed according to a Grounded Theory approach and it is focused on how practitioners conceive and pursue CBE through their branding strategies and tactics. Findings reveal that CBE is seen by practitioners as a *dynamic and process-based concept* evolving in intensity on the basis of the brand capability of increasingly intercepting consumers’ desires and expectations using all possible physical and virtual touchpoints between brand and consumers. CBE appears as an *overarching marketing concept* encapsulating different consumer decision-making dimensions, from brand preference to brand purchase. Furthermore CBE emerges as a *multi-dimensional construct* that beyond traditional cognitive, emotional and conative dimensions seems to be based on emerging *experiential and social dimensions* that appear as its central elements.

Background

Consumer–brand engagement (CBE) is a recent concept in the marketing literature expanding the domain of relationship marketing (Vivek *et al.* 2011), presently emphasised as a fundamental driver of both consumer decision-making process (Bowden 2009; Sprott *et al.* 2009) and brand equity (Schultz & Block 2011), being generally considered by marketers as a priority in branding strategies (Hollebeek 2011a).
However, currently in the marketing literature exists neither a clear nor a unitary definition of this concept, but only an implicit knowledge rooted in daily brand practices (Brodie et al. 2011a; Hollebeek 2011b). Practitioners conceive CBE as establishing a strong and enduring bond between brand and consumers based on an ongoing effort of the brand to activate consumers through interaction, shared values, experiential contents and rewards (Schultz 2007). In their CBE practices and efforts, marketers faced many problems and opportunities, acquiring a privileged and ‘grounded in the market’ perspective of the CBE concept that it is important to explore and understand in order to build a realistic conceptual framework of the CBE construct.

On the basis of these premises, this exploratory study – part of a wider qualitative study aimed at proposing a preliminary conceptual foundation of the CBE construct assuming the twofold perspective of consumers and practitioners – investigates the practitioner’s perspective on CBE, developing a bottom-up point of view rooted in the field to understand how practitioners mean, pursue and achieve CBE in their brand strategies. In other words, our study focuses on current brand practices to start building a shared knowledge of the CBE concept.

The gap between the academic and the practitioners’ approach to CBE

The analysis of the current marketing literature debate specifically focused on CBE has pointed out so far a different approach to CBE between the academic and the professional worlds (Gambetti & Graffigna 2010).

The academic approach to CBE

As for the academic marketing literature, it seems possible to identify three main literary streams on the CBE construct, as follows.

1. Studies focusing on the cognitive dimension of CBE, which represent the large majority of all the CBE studies, defined the CBE as a mental activation process of a consumer towards a brand (ARF 2006) and consider it a self-concept indicating the variable tendency of consumers to include brands in their self-concept (Sprott et al. 2009; Goldsmith et al. 2010). Other studies analysed engagement with reference to the capability of traditional and new media (media engagement) (Kilger & Romer 2007; Malthouse & Peck 2010) and
advertising (advertising engagement) to elicit consumers’ attention (Wang 2006).

2. Studies focusing on the affective component of CBE (Heath 2007, 2009) argued that a central role in eliciting consumer engagement towards advertising is played by the feelings activated in an individual during his processing of an ad.

3. Other recent studies pointed out the conative component, defining CBE as the customers’ behavioural manifestations towards a brand or firm, going beyond the mere purchase (Van Doorn et al. 2010; Verhoef et al. 2010).

Beyond these literature streams, Bowden (2009) proposed a comprehensive and dynamic view of CBE. In her view, CBE is basically a psychological process during which consumers become increasingly loyal to a brand. This process encompasses various stages of the consumer–brand relationship characterised by a growing level of commitment and trust, resulting in repeated purchasing behaviour and enduring loyalty.

More recently, Brodie et al. (2011a, 2011b) and Hollebeek (2011a) proposed the value co-creation theory perspective as the conceptual framework to analyse and interpret CBE. Their approach emphasises the role of interactive customer experience and co-created value between consumers and brand as the underlying conceptual foundations of CBE.

The analysis of the academic marketing literature highlights some open issues regarding the CBE construct: (1) a strong orientation towards the individualistic dimension of consumer behaviour focusing on dyadic relationships between consumer and brand as the main critical process in CBE; (2) a view of CBE that is scarcely prone to take into consideration the context (social, cultural and relational) in which the consumer–brand encounter takes place, ‘forcing’ CBE into traditional and already consolidated interpretative lenses; (3) fragmented views of CBE that, although significant, offer a partial representation of CBE, neglecting to develop a comprehensive view of its components.

The practitioner approach to CBE

The practitioner marketing literature emphasises the importance of the relationship among consumers and between them and their social context as key drivers affecting the CBE construct. This is evident in the current formulation of the communication mix on the part of brand
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managers, leveraging on the capability of brand messages and media context to elicit emotional responses, co-create multi-sensory consumption experiences, and encourage consumer–brand-related behaviours (e.g. positive word-of-mouth and brand endorsement among peers carried out in both face-to-face and internet-mediated contexts).

Moreover, the practitioner literature emphasises an extensive use of online communication tools (especially Web 2.0 and social media tools) as a core issue in the building of engagement. This points out interaction, socialisation and co-creation of brand values and content between employees and customers as important drivers of CBE (Armano 2008; Smeeton 2008; Tapscott 2008; Wilson 2008).

Due to its pragmatic approach, the practitioner marketing literature has revealed so far a strong focus on management issues of engagement (e.g. ROI evaluation, effective-efficient budget allocation), orientated towards decision making, problem solving, performance measurement (Maddox 2008) and optimal use of corporate assets such as communication, which emerges as a fundamental tool to stimulate consumer engagement (Jones 2007).

The need for a closer integration between academic and practitioner worlds

Our literature review pointed out, on the one hand, that the academic marketing literature has not yet focused on contextual and pragmatic aspects of CBE as the practitioner literature has. This may suggest the need for better integration of academic interests and the necessities of the business world. The gap between the academic and business world in terms of knowledge priorities and research agendas is well known and has been much discussed in the literature: academic researchers often aim at producing general, nomothetic theories, whereas professionals are more keen on ideographic and context-specific explanations (Benington & Hartley 2004).

The practitioners’ world, on the other hand, has not yet turned its attention to long-term engagement initiatives and strategic vision or theoretical issues aimed at furthering our knowledge of CBE. The emphasis is on tactical approaches and tools aimed at achieving short-term commercial results (Bruno-Britz 2008). Perhaps a more rigorous, strategic approach could help practitioners to attain a broader theoretical understanding (Boddy & Croft 2007) of the drivers and consequences of engagement that would prevent CBE from being seen as just another new marketing
‘trick’ to reawaken consumer attention and revitalise the media market in the short term. This may suggest that closer collaboration between academic marketing scholars and professionals could combine the rigour of the former with the relevance and practicality of the latter, to the benefit of both (Catterall & Clarke 2000; Boddy & Croft 2007; Mouncey 2007, 2009; Reibstein et al. 2009).

**Purpose of the study**

These considerations call for an exploratory inductive study, aimed at proposing a preliminary conceptual framework of CBE disclosing the knowledge embedded in marketing practice, since currently there is no established, unitary and shared knowledge on CBE. Moreover, the nature of engagement calls for the use of more flexible and in-depth research methods, able to explore and understand better psycho-social constructs such as CBE. From this perspective, qualitative methodology appears particularly suitable for the study of CBE, due to its capacity to explore subtle nuances of complex social phenomena (Holbrook & O'Shaughnessy 1988), to investigate the phenomenological significance of consumer-brand bonds, and to characterise and better understand the types of connection consumers establish with their brands (Fournier & Yao 1997; Fournier 1998).

Hence, our exploratory study is part of a wider qualitative research project designed according to a Grounded Theory approach and it is aimed at building a preliminary conceptual framework of the construct of CBE, starting with the analysis of the phenomenon and adopting the twofold perspective of consumers and practitioners. In the frame of such a research project, the present exploratory study focuses on the practitioner’s perspective on CBE, analysing the standpoint of both marketing managers and the communication professionals who are in charge of brands and make decisions with the aim of engaging consumers towards their brands. So, our study is centred on the branding strategies implemented by practitioners: how do marketers represent and give sense to CBE? How do they pursue CBE? And how do the CBE strategies/tactics implemented shape consumers’ relationship with the brand? In finding answers to these questions, our study will explore and highlight, in the practitioners’ view:

- the key drivers of CBE and how they relate to one another
- the evolutionary phases of the CBE process.
Research methodology

Our study is designed according to a constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz 2006), which seems to us particularly suitable to catch the complex, problematic and relativist nature of CBE.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews on a sample of marketing managers and communication professionals purposely selected according to the criteria of theoretical sampling (Glaser 1978; Charmaz 2006). Theoretical sampling means that participants are selected on the basis of the emerging analysis, and the theory being developed from data is subsequently modified from data obtained from the next participants. In total, 13 practitioners (six brand/marketing managers and seven communication professionals) have been interviewed so far, since this number of participants allowed us to reach a first data saturation (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Our choice to include in the sample both brand/marketing managers and communication professionals is due to the fact that they are both responsible for key brand-related decisions: the former, working in the company, are in charge of the strategic brand management process (e.g. definition of the brand identity and positioning, and tactical implementation of the integrated brand communication mix to drive revenues and maximise brand equity); and the latter, working in a communication/advertising/media agency, are in charge of the brand creative and media strategy to achieve corporate goals. The jobs of marketing managers and communication professionals are complementary in defining and achieving brand performances. Therefore, both their views, expectations and experiences related to CBE are equally important to develop a comprehensive and ecological understanding of our phenomenon.

Our theoretical sample was aimed at developing a wide coverage of the phenomenon and it included a diversified range of brand perspectives. The variety of interviewees (see Table 1) allowed us to sample a multiplicity of experiences that are both significant and prototypical of their industries, as well as different among one another, so as to develop a deeper understanding of our research object (Charmaz 2006; Morse et al. 2009).

Thus the marketing/brand managers interviewed were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- they are active in different product categories, addressing most major mass markets (home and personal care, food and beverage, consumer electronics, automotive)
they work for brands that are market leaders in their segments, characterised by a clearly distinctive emotional positioning and a high level of customer loyalty

they carry out brand strategies whose media mix combines traditional and unconventional communication tools (i.e. ambient communication, guerrilla marketing, Web 2.0 user-generated content and social media); indeed, brands making a balanced and integrated use of traditional and unconventional media emerge as those that are more sensitive to and focused on engaging consumers (Cova 2008).

As for the selected communication professionals:

- they serve in both traditional and unconventional advertising agencies, media agencies and advertising dealers
- their brand portfolio includes some among leader brands belonging to major mass markets.

All selected interviewees were contacted by email to check their availability to take part in the research, and they all accepted our invitation. Interviews lasted on average two hours each and were conducted face-to-face at their office. The interview guide was progressively structured and revised according to emergent insights from data analysis so as to allow the exploration of the practitioners’ perceptions, sensitivities and expectations

Table 1  Key informants’ profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chino San Pellegrino (Nestlé)</td>
<td>Beverage</td>
<td>Brand manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citroën (PSA Peugeot Citroën)</td>
<td>Automotive</td>
<td>Marketing manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Coca-Cola Company</td>
<td>Beverage</td>
<td>IMC director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixan (Henkel)</td>
<td>Laundry and home care</td>
<td>Brand manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dove (Unilever)</td>
<td>Personal care</td>
<td>Brand manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nokia</td>
<td>Telecommunication</td>
<td>Marketing director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDB (Ominicom Group Inc.)</td>
<td>Advertising agency</td>
<td>Strategic planner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogilvy &amp; Mather (WPP)</td>
<td>Advertising agency</td>
<td>Creative director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebola Industries</td>
<td>Unconventional advertising agency</td>
<td>Strategy director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enfants Terribles</td>
<td>Unconventional advertising agency</td>
<td>Strategic planning director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carat (Aegis Group)</td>
<td>Media agency</td>
<td>Unconventional media manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediacom (WPP)</td>
<td>Media agency</td>
<td>CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGP Decaux</td>
<td>Outdoor agency</td>
<td>Marketing director</td>
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on the following aspects: consumer behaviour trends; consumer–brand relationship features and dynamics; traditional–unconventional communication interplay; CBE conceptions and executions.

Integral transcripts of all interviews were analysed according to the procedure of Grounded Theory content analysis, which requires three sequential phases of coding: a first analysis step, named ‘open coding’, that implies a preliminary identification of concepts that fit with data; a second analysis step, named ‘axial coding’, that consists of the progressive aggregation and condensation of codes into broader categories; a final analysis step – ‘selective coding’ – consisting of the abstraction from data and the interpretive detection of connections among categories in order to find the ‘core category’ (i.e. the pivotal concept that articulates the whole process under investigation). This complex and systematic coding procedure (see Table 2) was aimed at describing the elements implied in the development of the engagement process and at defining its evolutionary phases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotations</th>
<th>Open coding</th>
<th>Axial coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Consumer is experiencing the economic crisis paying attention to promo-price dynamics’. (Key informant 10)</td>
<td>Consumer careful to price</td>
<td>Value for money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘It’s more and more difficult to define the consumer [...] now conflicting and I would say opposite elements coexist in his habits and expectations’. (Key informant 3)</td>
<td>Consumer difficult to define</td>
<td>Elusiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Today the consumer is attracted by beauty, by the atmosphere that a brand message creates’. (Key informant 7)</td>
<td>Consumer attracted by beauty</td>
<td>Aesthetic pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘We organized some flashmobs in several Italian squares ... there were ballet dancers performing choreography all around our cars involving passers-by to take part in the dance’. (Key informant 2)</td>
<td>Flashmob</td>
<td>Encounter</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selective coding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. First-order categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Second-order themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Pragmatism
2. CONSUMER PROTAGONISM

1. Unpredictability
2. CONSUMER PROTAGONISM

1. Hedonic fulfilment
2. CONSUMER PROTAGONISM

1. Street
2. PHYSICAL PROXIMITY

(continued)
Table 2  Examples of the coding procedure (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotations</th>
<th>Open coding</th>
<th>Axial coding</th>
<th>Selective coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'The brand today is a &quot;butler&quot; of the consumer ... it is a brand for which serving the consumer has become the core business': (Key informant 12)</td>
<td>'Butler' brand</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>1. First-order categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand serving the consumer</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Second-order themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'If you love my brand so much, I give you something that I don't give to anyone else ... if you devote your time to a brand, a brand does the same in turn': (Key informant 8)</td>
<td>Brand rewards affectionate consumer</td>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>1. Commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer devotes to brand</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. VALUE-BASED PROXIMITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand devotes to consumer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Social networking with our brand consumers feel indeed as if they're sitting at our table sharing ideas with us': (Key informant 7)</td>
<td>Social networking</td>
<td>Being 'on-board'</td>
<td>1. Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumers sitting at brand's table</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. VALUE-BASED PROXIMITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumers brand sharing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>'We need to broadcast to generate contacts and the only way to achieve this is using TV commercials': (Key informant 1)</td>
<td>Need to generate contacts</td>
<td>Broadcasting</td>
<td>1. Classical advertising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using TV advertising</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. BRAND COMMUNICATION INTEGRATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Consumer doesn't look for detailed information if he's immediately struck by a spectacular ambient that makes him open his eyes wide': (Key informant 4)</td>
<td>Brand strikes consumer</td>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td>1. Unconventional offline communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ambient communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. BRAND COMMUNICATION INTEGRATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'I know that my agency is working on a new platform and a new set of strategic tools enabling social creation. In my opinion the brand must be this': (Key informant 9)</td>
<td>Agency creates a social platform</td>
<td>User-generated content Socialisation</td>
<td>1. Unconventional online communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand going social</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. BRAND COMMUNICATION INTEGRATION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis was supported by the software Atlas.ti 6.0 (Muhr 1991), which allowed the systematic treatment of the corpus of data, keeping explicit track of all coding steps. Atlas.ti made it easy to retrieve quotations attached to each singular code in order to support the researchers in going backwards and forwards from data to categories and thus in keeping
analytical interpretations well grounded into data. This complex coding process was conducted in parallel by three researchers and discussed in several meetings in order to fine-tune the coding system used and to guarantee the rigour of the analytical process (Morse et al. 2002).

**Findings**

Our evidence suggests that, according to the practitioners’ perspective, CBE appears as a *multi-dimensional concept* combining such elements as attention, dialogue, interaction, emotions, sensorial pleasure and immediate activation aimed at creating a total brand experience with consumers.

A short time ago we used to focus on the seductive part rather than on the rational part. Today all these levels should be on the stage together with consistency. So the three levels: the rational, the emotional-sensorial and the dialogical level. *(Key informant 8)*

Let’s say that catching the attention is worth it if then you create a brand experience that takes you inside that world ... we have to stimulate immediate activation, more interaction that encourages the consumer to do something immediately. *(Key informant 7)*

CBE appears as an overarching marketing construct encapsulating different consumer decision-making dimensions, from brand preference to brand purchase.

Firstly [consumer engagement] is when at all levels of brand analysis someone has chosen you as his favorite brand; then this someone, who prefers your brand at all levels, gets to the buying experience that means all the path: from when you decide that Nokia is your favorite brand to the moment you go into the shop to buy Nokia. *(Key informant 6)*

Practitioners tend to perceive and conceptualise CBE not in abstract terms but through the account of the brand practices they carry out to engage consumers.

Consumer is engaged when our brand stirs him up ... last year we set up a concept store downtown that literally thrilled our consumers. *(Key informant 4)*

CBE is conceived as difficult both to catch and manage in its whole complexity, for which no previous assumptions appear to be helpful enough, and for which practitioners feel to be not ready yet. This
overwhelming complexity is translated by practitioners into ongoing CBE strategy experimentations and attempts, according to a ‘trial and error’ managerial approach.

We’re trying, we experiment, even our partners who are supposed to be our external consultants in these matters are themselves not ready for that. (Key informant 3)

The process of CBE: ‘brand enacting’ and its drivers

*Brand enacting* emerges as the preliminary ‘core category’ of our study, and according to practitioners’ perceptions it appears as the pivotal element for the activation of a CBE process. *Brand enacting* means that consumers ‘put the brand into action’, participating in the world of the brand. The brand thus gets embedded in consumers’ lives, becoming ‘an enabler of their doings’.

Consumer engagement is the participation to the brand which means the consumer somehow manipulates, possesses, and acts the brand; so the brand is transformed, it’s not passive anymore, it’s acted by the consumer. (Key informant 7)

A consumer is engaged when naturally he values your brand as an integral part of his life that means your brand satisfies a consumer’s need which changes over time. So the brand is able to follow you over time. (Key informant 3)

*Brand enacting* seems to be determined by three drivers centred on the brand–consumer relationship, the consumer, and the brand communication strategy. Such drivers are: physical and value-based proximity; consumer protagonism; brand communication integration.

**Physical and value-based proximity**

From our evidence, brand and consumer proximity emerges as the most relevant dimension in triggering CBE. Brand–consumer relationship is experiencing a *physical and value-based approach* of the brand to its consumers. This ‘approach’ is based on the will of the brand to encounter its consumers directly, enabling them to explore the brand, to know it, to manipulate it and ultimately to develop with it an intimate relationship leading to an increasing level of *brand enacting*. This relationship appears to be based on complicity, reciprocal commitment and trust, exactly as happens with human interpersonal relationships.
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A brand which has become more human and it has somehow come closer to the client as a person not only as a prospect. (Key informant 2)

The relationship with a brand is somehow like a relationship with another person: if you devote your time to a brand, a brand does the same in turn. (Key informant 8)

In more detail, in practitioners’ experiences this ‘approach’ seems to be characterised, on the one hand, by an initiative of the brand to physically encounter consumers in the streets they traverse, the squares they gather in, the places where they go to buy or consume (sales points, shopping malls, events venues, etc.), at precisely those times when they are most receptive to brand messages, most laid-back, most open to new ideas, most prepared to listen and interact, identifying and enhancing all possible touchpoints where brand and consumers can get in touch and experience each other directly.

We have to be less and less the decision makers of brand strategies from behind our desk, and we have to become more and more the executors of what the consumer asks to the brand itself. (Key informant 3)

We have to pay more and more attention to the direct contact so … being again close to people. (Key informant 1)

On the other hand, this ‘approach’ seems to be marked by an effort of the brand to get closer to the world of consumers, trying to understand them more deeply from both social and psychological standpoints. This is in order to establish with them a strong emotional link, highlighting the brand as a container of consumers’ memories, habits and affections.

If our Christmas spot goes on air one week later they call us and say – hey guys where’s the Christmas spot? – because it’s not Christmas without Coca-Cola as Coca-Cola means family, staying together. (Key informant 3)

There’s an emotional relation toward the brand which means the brand should be more attentive in reassuring the consumer that his trust is well placed. … brands such as Dixan whose claim is ‘The clean you love’ … remind you of scents from your childhood. (Key informant 4)

In Figure 1, coding related to the ‘physical and value-based proximity’ driver described above is summarised.
Consumer protagonism

Practitioners depict consumers as pragmatic and unpredictable individuals, looking for hedonic fulfilment in their relationship with the brand. The consumer is seen as more informed and critical than in the past, having developed strong expertise thanks to ongoing information-seeking activity, being aware of the pros and cons of different products, and increasingly responsible in purchasing, looking for value for money based on quality at a fair price.

People used to go in the shop and ask for advice to the shop assistant and then buy. Now the situation is changing upside-down so the consumer goes into the shop with the print-out from Internet to say – I want this. (Key informant 6)

Consumer is experiencing the economic crisis paying attention to promo-price dynamics. (Key informant 10)

Consumers are also perceived as unpredictable, being often elusive and inconsistent in their actions, and being multimedia and multitasking.
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Target analysis is impossible because neither we can segment and distinct our target in niches anymore, nor we can identify trends and understand what that means. (Key informant 7)

We really ask the question – who are they [the consumers]? How can we manage to be listened to? – because it’s really hard to catch them in their being dynamic and non-repetitive. (Key informant 3)

Finally, consumers are perceived by practitioners as individuals looking for hedonic fulfilment from the brand, based on innovation, relationship exclusivity, aesthetic pleasure and astonishment.

Innovation is the only leverage left to corporate brands to try to get the consumer on their side. (Key informant 5)

[Consumers] want to be somehow astonished by a co-marketing, by a bundle of products which have never been included in our sector before. (Key informant 2)

All these features, in the practitioner’s view, emphasise the request for a consumer cognitive and emotional protagonism in the relationship with the brand, which is characterised by an increasing level of consumer–brand interaction to satisfy his desire to be the centre of attention.

You cannot think ‘I produce, I put in the market, and I sell’ because the consumer wants to interact with the company, he asks for answers, he critics, he praises. (Key informant 4)

Tomorrow, the users themselves will modify somehow and take real part in the brand itself and in its manifestations. (Key informant 2)

The willingness of the brand to activate an ongoing dialogue with consumers seems, then, to enhance their active role as the real protagonists of the consumer–brand relationship – a protagonism leading consumers to ‘enact’ the brand as part of their life.

Figure 2 summarises the coding aggregated around the ‘consumer protagonism’ driver previously presented in this section.

Brand communication integration

The progressive brand communication integration that marketers are achieving in their promotional plans supports a shift from a passive consumer being reached by an advertising message to an increasingly active consumer – a consumer willing to get into the world of the brand,
to live entertainment and emotional experiences with it, to participate in the creation of brand-related content, and to socialise brand values and stories with peers through word-of-mouth and online viral spreading of messages.

The consistent and combined use of traditional advertising and innovative unconventional communication (e.g. ambient/guerrilla advertising, branded stores, marketing events, online branded interactive platforms, online branded social media) fosters consumer–brand enacting, which progressively increases from traditional advertising to online social media brand applications. Traditional communication guarantees broadcasting and mass visibility, while its integration with unconventional communication allows the direct encounter between the brand and its consumers (especially young consumers), ‘breaking through the clutter’ and delivering personalised messages.

So we design a 360° communication plan because today there’s no housewife who spends all the day in front of the TV. (Key informant 11).

Communication should be more and more tailor-made. (Key informant 10)

We’re moving toward the social creation and management of the brand. Brands will be communicated by the society through the social media. (Key informant 1)

Figure 3 shows the coding associated with the ‘brand communication integration’ driver as presented in this section.
The phases of the CBE process

Practitioners highlight the process of CBE as characterised by three relational phases marked by increasing levels of *brand enacting* that are related to the brand’s ability to progressively ‘approach’ its consumers, building with them a bond that shows a growing relationship strength. In the first phase of the CBE process the brand reveals its *appearance to consumers*, then in the second its *body*, and finally in the third its *soul*, showing consumers an increasing level of openness, indicative of how the brand ‘yields’ to consumers and how consumers ‘get possession’ of the brand. Since in the first phase the brand is far from consumers showing them only its external *appearance*, *brand enacting* is limited, reaching the highest level in the third ‘approach’ phase when the brand opens its *soul* to consumers.

The shift from a CBE phase to the following seems to be supported by two main turning points: the *level of brand disclosure* towards its consumers, and the *level of consumer interaction* allowed by the brand communication strategy and related tools. By *brand disclosure* we mean that the brand opens its world to consumers looking for a direct encounter.
with them to share values and meanings. By *consumer interaction* we mean that consumers directly take part in an exchange process with the brand.

As for the *level of brand disclosure*, our study suggests that the opening of the brand towards consumers allows an increasing level of consumer–brand affinity through the progressive socialisation of its values and content from a phase to the following one – in other words, through the ‘going social’ of the brand. As regards the *level of consumer interaction*, our evidence points out that the progressive adding of marketing communication tools in the integrated media mix used by the brand allows an increasing level of consumer interactivity and participation from a phase to the following one.

Figure 4 shows the progressive development of CBE along the three phases.

**Figure 4** The process of CBE

*Brand appearance: the brand ‘stays behind its desk’*

In the first phase, the brand ‘boasts’ its ‘appearance’ and keeps its distance from consumers, who can only look at and admire it, but not touch it. It is the dimension of the past, of the brand ‘staying firm behind its desk’ inside the company, of the massive use of traditional advertising supporting unidirectional communication, and of the consumer seen by the brand as a passive target to reach or even an individual to ‘pilot’ towards companies’
interests. In this phase, CBE and consumer–brand enacting are very limited in the practitioner’s perception.

The user must be persuaded that he himself chooses the best for him even if he needs to be somehow ‘driven’ because company’s offering is limited. (Key informant 2)

Companies are more prone to monologue rather than dialogue. ... Monologue could be very impactful: I think of Antonio in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, it was an extraordinary monologue; everybody can be fascinated by this monologue. (Key informant 12)

**Brand body: the brand ‘gets into the streets’**

In the second phase, the brand shows its ‘body’, its ‘muscles’, to consumers, looking for a physical encounter with them, activating them at both a sensory and an emotional level. According to practitioners, it is the dimension of the present, of the brand ‘leaving the desk and getting into the streets’ to meet and directly relate to its consumers using all possible tricks to ‘astonish them’, involving them in multi-sensory experiences, building temporary communities.

People who are able to manage communities or territorial events should be the head of marketing ... It’s a necessary change of perspective: getting from the desk into the streets means changing your world completely. (Key informant 7)

It is the dimension of a formal aesthetic protagonism of the consumer, seen by the brand as ‘an individual to seduce’. In this phase CBE is basically induced by aesthetical aspects of the brand, and the relationship between brand and consumer is based mainly on contextual and contingent clues, such as creative communication devices (i.e. ambient installations and branded events) and entertainment tactical actions (i.e. flashmobs and temporary shops), driving a temporary consumer–brand enacting.

In malls we can catch the users in a moment of free time so we can contact directly people and they can ‘meet’ and try our products. (Key informant 2)

It was really an awesome event. Last year we filled up Milan with these huge bottles designed by stylists, and we had to watch them because one of them was stolen after half an hour. Unbelievable! Someone liked the bottle so much that he wanted to have it. (Key informant 3)
Brand soul: the brand 'gets into consumers' homes'

In the third phase, the brand ‘gets into the homes’ of consumers, bringing them ‘on board’, opening completely to them and interacting with them in a genuine symmetric way. Consumers get in touch with the brand ‘soul’ and ‘get possession of it’, naturalising the brand in their life and sharing its values with other people. At this stage consumers develop with the brand a relationship of intimacy stemming both from a high level of mutual commitment based on dialogue, dedication, value-based affinity and complicity, and from a high level of reciprocal trust.

Engagement is creating a relation that goes beyond the contact with the consumer who has bought my phone, it is creating a set of macro-projects which covers the daily relationship with the consumer ... being in his daily life without intruding ... you have to make clear that you’re there, that’s the way we create reciprocal trust with our consumers. (Key informant 6)

In engagement there are elements of brand opening, where brand and consumer are more connected in a symmetric way ... there’s more sharing of a relational space where everybody brings into something and creates complicity. (Key informant 9)

On that basis the brand can even become an ‘intergenerational link’, being admitted in the consumers’ family as well as admitting consumers in its own corporate family. This link encapsulates an authentic and long-lasting brand–consumer emotional bond.

I buy Dixan because my mother used to, because she was happy. (Key informant 4)

Our customers are like our employees, for example at the end of 2009 we granted them the same discount on our cars we reserved to our employees. (Key informant 2)

In this phase the brand is totally ‘embedded’ in consumers’ lives, since they take it always with them without even being aware of it, unless it is missing. From the analysis of practitioners’ accounts, this appears as the highest manifestation of CBE, being the moment in which consumers establish a truly enduring relationship with the brand and fully ‘enact’ it, making of it whatever they want, and creating brand content to share with peers.

This is the phase in which consumers can shape the brand as they like directly inside their homes, making a genuine ‘social use’ of Web 2.0 tools that enables value co-creation between the brand and its consumers. At this point loyal customers may even become brand ambassadors.
Alfa Romeo has recently invited its loyal customers to participate in the management of its brand community and in the creation of a SUV prototype ... So Alfa Romeo has created a group of brand ambassadors, highly convinced of brand value! (Key informant 7)

Except for a few cases, this third CBE phase is perceived by practitioners as a future achievement that is still to be accomplished, a ‘goal to aim for’, in branding strategies that currently allow mainly a formal protagonism of the consumer.

Brands are not ready yet to listen to consumers, to engage in dialogue with them. Brands just create fan pages on Facebook and that’s it. This is not dialogue! (Key informant 1)

This future achievement requires the real protagonism of the consumer in the relationship with the brand that is meant as a ‘social creation platform’ allowing true consumer participation and interaction using all possible brand–consumer touchpoints, both physical and virtual.

Social creation! A brand should be that. I mean the brand is not the product that we sell all over the world, but it’s everything behind that, all the conversations on the web, the events, and the relations on the territory, the shops. It’s something wider and it needs to become social ... we have to give the horse its head. (Key informant 7)

In practitioners’ perceptions, the consumer, then, should be not seen by the brand as a target any more, but as a partner joining at the corporate decision-making table.

We should say to our consumer: ‘Have a sit at our table and tell us your opinion and let’s plan together’ ... The company does not end with its employees, but it ends with the final users of its products. (Key informant 13)

The process of CBE at a glance: a preliminary conceptual framework

To summarise our findings, Figure 5 offers a comprehensive overview of our exploratory conceptual framework of the practitioners’ perspective on the process of CBE, as illustrated in previous sections.

In the figure, brand enacting emerges as the pivotal element for the activation of a CBE process, appearing thus as the preliminary core category of our exploratory study. The three drivers of brand enacting and their dimensions are presented in the upper half of Figure 5. As previously
argued, practitioners emphasise physical and value-based proximity as the fundamental driver of brand enacting. Increasing levels of the three drivers seem to mark progress in the CBE process, highlighting a higher CBE intensity.

In particular, our evidence suggests that the more the consumer is the real protagonist of brand strategy, the closer the brand gets to him and, the more the communication mix is integrated, then the higher the level of brand enacting is. Furthermore, CBE seems to increase in intensity as soon as the brand leaves its desk and moves closer to consumers, finally getting into their homes and becoming totally embedded in their lives. At this final stage the brand is completely open to consumers’ manipulation and interaction, and CBE reaches its highest level.

**Discussion**

As the real market context represents the environment where the concept and the practice of CBE were first developed, the original value of this
The Grounded Theory approach to consumer–brand engagement

study lies in the fact that it offers an exploratory conceptual framework of CBE based on the investigation of the practitioners’ perspective on such a construct, in the attempt to build shared knowledge starting from the study of the current brand practices carried out to achieve CBE.

Our exploratory study is also original since it is focused on consumer–brand relationships developed in the mass-market goods industry, where an increasingly complex market scenario makes it more and more challenging for brands to differentiate, and highlights their capability to develop and maintain CBE as the highest manifestation of competitive differentiation and brand equity (Schultz & Block 2011).

From a conceptual standpoint, our study reveals that CBE is indiscriminately for practitioners both a current crucial dimension of the relationship between brand and consumer, and a fundamental value to which to attend in the future. CBE is perceived and conceptualised by practitioners not in abstract terms but in practical terms, ‘reconstructing’ it through the description of their brand strategies and tactics devoted to enhance the consumer–brand relationship.

CBE is also seen as a dynamic and process-based concept evolving over time in intensity on the basis of the brand’s capability of increasingly intercepting consumers’ desires and expectations using all possible physical and virtual touchpoints between brand and consumers.

CBE requires for practitioners a long-term strategy aimed at building trust- and commitment-based consumer–brand relationships, even though currently there seems to be no strategic approach to CBE, but a tactical and day-to-day brand management policy, even if self-criticised by practitioners. They see CBE as a very difficult concept both to catch and manage in its whole complexity, for which no previous assumptions appear to be helpful enough and for which they feel themselves to be not ready yet. For this reason practitioners undertake ongoing experimentations in branding strategies according to a ‘trial and error’ approach. Currently, this approach appears basically aimed at developing an intense but temporary consumer–brand relational bond based on catchy communication initiatives to achieve short-term revenues.

CBE also emerges as a meta-organiser of the relationship between brand and consumer that in the practitioner’s perception appears as an overarching marketing construct encapsulating different consumer decision-making dimensions, from brand preference to brand purchase, characterised by a growing level of CBE intensity and supported by different integrated marketing communication initiatives. CBE appears, then, not to be a new construct, but rather a semantic container of other
key marketing constructs, and which represents the comprehensive brand effort of ‘getting closer’ to its consumers, and establishing with them an increasingly strong relationship from the moment they develop a preference for a brand to the follow-up period of their brand purchase. In other words, CBE appears in practitioners’ perceptions as an *umbrella concept* that acts both as ‘collector’ and ‘intensifier’ of the various dimensions that may characterise the development of the consumer–brand relationship over time. Thus CBE seems to collect and enhance dimensions such as consumer–brand acquaintance, shared meaning-making, emotional bond and value co-creation.

Furthermore, in line with previous studies (Bowden 2009; Brodie *et al.* 2011a), CBE emerges as a *multi-dimensional construct*. However, beyond traditional cognitive, emotional and conative dimensions, our evidence suggests that CBE is more based on emerging experiential and social dimensions, which appear as the central elements of the CBE construct and seem actually difficult to be forced into consolidated positivist theoretical assumptions that clearly separate cognitive, emotional and conative dimensions.

The *experiential dimension* encompasses physical, corporeal and multi-sensory elements of the consumer–brand encounter (Schmitt 1999). Whereas the traditional cognitive, emotional and conative components are perceived by marketers as the ‘taken for granted ones’, the composite *experiential dimension* currently seems to predominate in the relationship between brand and consumer, emphasising a ‘touchy-feely’ relational approach of the brand towards consumers strongly relying on such temporary hedonic elements as multi-sensory contact, astonishment, amusement and aesthetic pleasure as basic CBE drivers (Hirschman & Holbrook 1982).

The *social dimension* comprises interaction, participation, dialogue, co-creation, and sharing of brand-related values and contents, emphasising the openness of the brand towards consumers, aimed at ‘taking them on board’ and letting them be part of its world. Unlike predominant academic studies’ assumptions, which support an individual-based perspective on CBE, highlighting it as a self-concept basically related to the affinity between a brand and a consumer’s self-concept (Sprott *et al.* 2009; Goldsmith *et al.* 2010; Verhoef *et al.* 2010), our evidence suggests that the CBE construct is clearly associated by practitioners with social elements of the consumer–brand relationship (i.e. interaction and participation allowed by the brand to consumers in its communication tools and brand-related social exchanges with peers). This highlights that, beyond
dyadic consumer–brand relationship and affinity, true and enduring CBE is related to the brand’s effort to ‘go social’ – that is, to become a ‘social creation platform’ for its consumers. However, such social dimensions of the CBE construct appear as not yet having achieved their full potential, being more values to which to attend in the future than a current condition.

Our study also points out that CBE emerges as a multi-phase process marked by a progressive ‘physical and value-based approach’ of the brand to its consumers, emphasising different levels of their brand enacting. Brand enacting means that consumers ‘put the brand into action’, participating in its world. It means that consumers and brand interactively co-create value (i.e. consumers participate in creating products and brand communication campaigns; consumers ‘reinvent’ the use of brand, adapting it to their own lifestyle and personality) in a physical and value-based encounter. In other words, a brand is ‘enacted’ when it can be manipulated and shaped by the consumer as he likes, acting as the ‘passe-partout’ and the enabler of his needs and desires. Furthermore, when the brand is ‘enacted’, it gets embedded in the consumer’s life, becoming a kind of a ‘life-mate’ for them, which stands by them in their daily experiences just like a trustworthy partner.

This evidence is in line with the most recent perspectives on CBE, highlighting value co-creation as a relevant conceptual foundation for this construct (Brodie et al. 2011a; Hollebeek 2011b). Brand enacting also points out a consumer–brand relationship form that owns the features of a human relationship, thus revealing the appropriateness of the adoption of an interpersonal relationship perspective (Fournier & Yao 1997; Fournier 1998) to characterise and explore the development of the relationship process between consumers and their brands over time. This process seems to be marked by an increasing level of affinity, intimacy, mutual commitment and reciprocal trust.

Our study also reveals that, in approaching its consumers, the brand, as a human being, leaves ‘its desk’, and ‘gets into the streets’ to encounter consumers, and finally ‘gets into their home’, showing an increasing openness towards them. The moving closer of the brand to its consumers points out a shift in the marketing focus: from a brand-centric perspective to a formal consumer protagonism, and then to a final real protagonism of the consumer. The brand-centric perspective emphasises a clear brand protagonism and sees a concept of consumer as target to reach, like it was in the past, using mainly mass-media communication to grab consumers’ attention through one-way catchy brand messages. As for formal consumer protagonism, it is based on the present ‘aesthetic brand effort’
to personalise products in their superficial attributes (e.g. new product versions, design, colours, packaging, scent), and to make use of unique and glamorous communication tools involving consumers in temporary or one-shot branded entertainment experiences. At this stage brands try to seduce consumers, making them feel like protagonists of the relationship with them. Yet brands still hold control of the communication process. Finally, real consumer protagonism is based on a true active role played by consumers in creating and spreading brand values through participation, socialisation, co-creation and total enactment of the brand in their daily lives, with the support of online interactive platforms and social media. At this stage consumers not only feel but in fact are brand meaning makers, activating themselves brand communication processes both with the company and with peers. This final stage seems still to be a ‘value to which to attend’ in the future, being currently achieved by only a few brands.

Managerial implications

Our study reveals that, currently, there is a clear self-awareness on the part of practitioners of the inadequacy of existing business models to sustain a real consumer protagonism capable of affecting brand equity. Business models are perceived as outdated and often stemming from a rigid business mentality of companies, still focusing on number of contacts generated, short-term return on investment, tangible commercial results and traditional performance measurement indicators. An inadequacy that often drives also to a mere tactical use of unconventional communication initiatives, to simply ‘boast’ the brand in the market scenario without developing any strategic approach to their use.

Our evidence also points out important managerial consequences. To engage consumers towards their brands, marketers should get into the lives of their consumers, activating them emotionally and especially physically, and establishing with them a deep and authentic relationship. To achieve this goal, practitioners should carry out a brand strategy based on some key elements: (1) value-based affinity, the brand is for consumers a kind of container of thoughts, perceptions, and meanings, and it is then fundamental that those elements stem from a value system that is consistent with that of consumers; (2) brand embeddedness in consumers’ daily lives – that is, the brand should have functional, aesthetic and symbolic features that allow it to be a firm point of reference for consumers in their daily lives, encouraging them to take (physically or metaphorically) the brand always with them as a ‘life mate’; (3) leverage of consumers’ protagonism.
- that is, the brand should always be able to support both the protagonism and the self-achievement desire of its consumers, allowing them to shape, manipulate and enact the brand as they wish.

**Methodological implications and limits**

The study of the CBE construct - due to its ductile and mutable nature - requires the adoption of research approaches that are ecological, situated and maximally sensitive. In this regard qualitative research appears the most suitable approach in order to found a conceptual framework able to describe the development of such a construct. Qualitative research, across its different declinations and epistemological roots, is configured as a research strategy that is tailor-made, close to context and made ‘with’ people rather than ‘on’ people (Cassell & Symon 2004); these features make it adequate to the analysis of the dynamic and process-based relationship that links consumers to their brands.

In the qualitative research tradition repertoire, constructionist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006) provides a sensitive glance at CBE, since it is process based, multi-faceted and context driven, thus explorable only in a limited way with neo-positivist traditional research approaches.

However, our proposed conceptual framework is preliminary and needs further confirmation. In this regard, our Grounded Theory study is ongoing since further data collection and analysis is due in order to build a substantial theory grounded in the data. Furthermore, in order to achieve this ambitious goal, a better exploration of the context features (i.e. at the relational and socio-cultural level) in which CBE develops is needed. Such an exploration could take advantage of an ethnographic research approach, complementary to the Grounded Theory one. This complex and multi-method exploration would be a precious methodological lens through which to draft a complete and robust theoretical framework, able to explain the antecedents and consequences of CBE, beyond its development phases.

The final stage of this exploration would be to reach a synthetic interpretive model of CBE, which could then be verified and dimensioned through quantitative research approaches.

**References**


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