

# Unforgettable brands: image heritage and consumer engagement in online communities

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## Abstract

**Purpose of the paper:** *The paper identifies a link between the consumers' image heritage and consumer engagement towards brand and community. This objective is focused on a virtual brand community, in the context of non-grocery retailing.*

**Methodology:** *A simple random sample was extracted from the Italian online community of Leroy Merlin. Data was collected through 100 Skype interviews. The collected data has been submitted to bivariate analysis.*

**Findings:** *There is a noticeable dependence between image heritage and consumer brand engagement, as well as between image heritage and consumer community engagement.*

**Research limits:** *Chi-square value, that verifies the relationship between constructs, depends on the sample size. Perspectives of other relevant stakeholders are not adopted. Online brand communities, created by firms, are the only ones to be investigated. Generalizing findings is another limit.*

**Practical implications:** *It is not possible to engage the consumer if brand managers ignore or underestimate a planned management of image heritage. To engage the consumer means to discover, explore, enhance, and preserve the heritage image.*

**Originality of the paper:** *This paper introduces the Consumer Image Heritage Engagement (CIHE), that is a synthesis of the starting constructs. An integrated framework is proposed in order to effectively and efficiently manage the CIHE.*

*Key words: image heritage; consumer brand engagement; consumer community engagement; online brand community; consumer image heritage engagement*

## 1. Introduction

In a digitally connected world, thanks to the steady progress of communication technologies and web sharing applications, firms can avail themselves of new channels for interaction with consumers. Then, whenever an increasing lack of efficiency of the traditional communication channels is taking place, firms are experiencing a mere monologue with the market. Such context fosters a wider structuring and spreading of the online brand community. The latter are based on a shortened communication distance between firms and consumers, as well as on the interactive dialogue between members. Within this context, online brand communities result to be particularly fit for engaging consumers, involving them at different levels (emotional, cognitive, behavioural), thus helping them to express their co-creative potentials.

Even within the online brand communities built upon “*conversational relationships*” (Stokes, 2000, p. 52) with the market, it is hard and necessary to engage a consumer in order to get a lasting and defendable competitive advantage. Firms find difficulties because of the post-modern character of consumers, to be engaged as regards the brand and the community. Consumers are less inclined than in the past to build a solid relationship with the brand (Fabris 2003) and look for a maximization of the value of their consumption experience (Fabris, 2009), guided by their pragmatism. Another important aspect to point out is the development of the consumers’ identity: from being the authors of product consumption and value destruction, they have become the promoters of product development and renewal process, of identity and meanings of the brand, by the use of their creative competences and resources (Rossi, 2014).

The difficulty of engaging this kind of consumers, can be limited if the factors causing engagement are well defined and are well managed in favour of the brand and of the community. From this point of view this paper is focused on the relationship between image heritage and consumer brand /community engagement, so that the engagement of the consumer towards the brand and the community depends on the building of the brand image in the past by the consumer.

Starting from these preliminary remarks, the article follows this roadmap: the main contributions of literature on image heritage and on consumer engagement in the online brand communities are reviewed. This allows to lay the foundations for the setting up of the research goals and hypotheses. Then there is the description of the conceptual framework, that is the constructs on which the empirical investigation is based. The explanation of the methodology used for verifying the hypotheses of the research previously described, is propaedeutical for the discussion of the findings which lead to the introduction of the Consumer Image Heritage Engagement (CIHE) and of an integrated framework for managing it in the best way. Finally, we focus our attention on the limits of this study, on its implications and on the future lines of research.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Some theoretical references about image heritage*

The scientific contributions about image heritage can be found within a recent trend of marketing literature, focused on the time dimension of the brand (Hudson, 2011; Balmer, 2013; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014) and on its strategic, managerial, constitutional and value components.

Within this trend, a few studies investigate upon the idea of time in the building of the brand image by the consumer (Rindell, 2013). In this regard, Dowling (2002) sustains that the previous consumer experiences of the firm and its offer, influence the building of such image. Simms and Trott (2006), likewise, emphasize the importance of the brand heritage in the perception that consumers have of the brand, that is of the BMW Mini in this case. Again in the automobile sector, Braun-La Tour *et al.*

(2007) investigate about the role played by childhood memories in today's consumers' brand preferences.

The idea of image heritage in its original sense, has been introduced by Rindell (2007, 2013) with reference to the large-scale distribution sector. In particular, it consists of the experiences made in the past, directly by the consumer or by others close to him, with a firm and its offer. Such experiences influence the consumer in the building of the brand image in the present and the expectations he will have in the future about the brand itself. Upon these grounds, the image is rightly considered as a dynamic and continuous process, in which the past, the present and the future merge together in a one time dimension (Rindell and Iglesias, 2014). Besides the aspects defining the idea, the content of image heritage, is also described, which results to be consisting of time awareness interval, content of the first experiences and time focus (Rindell, 2007; Rindell *et al.*, 2010).

The contribution of Rindell *et al.* (2015), integrate an important study on the brand heritage by da Urde *et al.* (2007). The latter believe that the brand heritage is an aspect of the brand based on longevity, fundamental values, symbology, history and awareness by the firm and of the importance of such factors. Rindell *et al.* (2015) add a further component of the brand heritage, which is represented by the image heritage. The authors themselves, also reflect upon the possibility of lack of correspondence between the image heritage, as it is seen by consumers and the point of view of the firm about its historical business and brand heritage. A similar situation is due to a divergence of views of the consumer and the firm, as regards what to consider important in terms of heritage.

## 2.2 Consumer engagement in online brand communities: the main contributions

Online brand communities are above all brand communities, described by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) as specialized communities, disconnected from the specific territorial context and based upon a structured whole of social relationships between a brand's admirers. According to the same authors, brand communities are characterized by a collective identity and by a marked sense of belonging to a group, by the presence of shared rituals and traditions and by a sense of moral responsibility towards the other members of the community (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Schau and Muniz, 2002; Madupu and Krishnan, 2008). Unlike the traditional brand communities, the online communities refer to a virtual environment in which the interaction between members is mediated by the Internet (Füller *et al.*, 2007). Literature identifies at least four key factors of the online brand communities, in consideration of the interaction between members (Brogi, 2014). These are: participation, as interaction with the community and between members (Casalò *et al.*, 2010); quality of relationships and communication (Adjei *et al.*, 2010) and identification within the community (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005).

In the scientific debate about the brand communities, an important role is played by the consumer engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). Its theoretical bases can be traced back, among others, to the Relationship

Marketing Theory (Morgan e Hunt, 1994), which emphasizes the necessity of engaging consumers in the process of value creation, aiming at long term interactive relationships. The roots of the consumer engagement can be also found in the Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964), according to which social relationships are based on the exchange of benefits proportionally to the costs borne by the stakeholders involved. As regards the engaged consumer, attracted by the idea of gift and the product given free of charge, such benefits can be obtained much further along the time defined by a single interaction. Reflections upon the engagement can be also found within the Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008), according to which the consumer is an operant resource (Carù, 2007), which creates value together with the firm, when it gives new meanings to the goods used. The existing literature has not come to a shared definition of engagement yet (Qualizza, 2016). This causes an inevitable lack of homogeneity among the authors, as regards the terminological aspects (consumer engagement, customer engagement, brand engagement, etc.), the constitutional dimensions (Dessart *et al.*, 2015) and the interrelationships with previous and consequent variables. Within this context we find the study by Brodie *et al.* (2011), in which five fundamental hypotheses delimiting the conceptual domain of the consumer engagement in online brand communities are formulated. Such hypotheses result into a general definition of the concept, which is considered a psychological state of mind determined by the interaction of the consumer with a specific subject (brand, business, products) and/or stakeholders (firms, other consumers) within a network of relationships, aiming at the co-creation of value. The properties of the consumer engagement are: a) multidimensionalism, because it includes the emotional, cognitive and behavioural components of consumers, which emerge during the interaction; b) the dependence on the context, since that different context conditions determine different levels of engagement in terms of intensity and complexity; c) the central position within the network of relationships of the consumer engagement compared with other relational constructs which function as previous or consequent factors.

As regards the latter property, Brodie *et al.* (2013) identifies the previous history of the consumer engagement within the online brand communities, in triggers, such as the need for reducing costs for the search of information and the necessity of reducing the risk perceived. The consequent factors of the consumer engagement are identified in the idea of fidelity and satisfaction, empowerment, connection and emotional ties, trust and commitment. Between the previous history and the consequent events, the same authors set the sub-processes of consumer engagement, such as: acquisition of cognitive competences which the consumer uses on making a decision of purchase and consumption; sharing of relevant information, knowledge and personal experiences; recommendation of firms, brands, products, services and their use procedures and socialization among the members of the community, co-development of new products, services, brands or brand meanings, together with the firm. Brodie *et al.* (2013) go further into the conceptualization of the disengagement among previously

engaged consumers, who decide to stop interacting with the online brand community provisionally (dormancy) or permanently (termination).

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### 3. Research plan

#### 3.1 Objectives

The paper is focused on the analysis of the relationship between the building of the brand image in the past by the consumer and his engagement towards the brand and the online community in the sector of the large scale distributon. The setting of this goal is influenced by the Consumer Culture Theory, based on the recognition of the role of the protagonist played by the consumer in the building of the brand meanings and in starting relationships with the brand (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Gordon, 2006; Aitken *et al.*, 2008, Merz *et al.*, 2009).

The purpose of the research is set as a response to some suggestions found in literature, inviting to enlarge and deepen knowledge from many points of view. In this regard, Rindell (2013) highlights the need to increase awareness about the time dimension of the image heritage and the effects it has on the consumer. Dessart *et al.* (2015), instead, affirm the necessity of carrying out further studies on the consumer engagement, which is a quite new concept. Nambisan and Baron (2007), while agreeing upon this, underline the necessity of focusing studies on the consumer engagement within the context of the online brand communities. Wirtz *et al.* (2013), finally, point out how few empirical investigations are carried out on the double level of interaction of the consumer with the brand and the community.

In order to help filling such gaps in literature, we suggest the following research hypotheses:

*HP1: There is a relationship between image heritage and consumer brand engagement, so that the consumer engagement towards the brand depends on the building of the brand image in the past, by the consumer.*

*HP2: There is a relationship between image heritage and consumer community engagement, so that the consumer engagement towards the community depends on the building of the brand image in the past by the consumer.*

#### 3.2 Conceptual framework

The objectivess and hypotheses of the research refer to the Italian community “Impara, fai, condividi”, created by Leroy Merlin, brand of the Adeo Group. This choice is motivated by the following reasons. Besides being a leading company in the sector of bricolage and do-it-yourself (Company Profile, 2016), Leroy Merlin boasts 94 years of history. Such longevity explains why the company has decided to concentrate its attention upon this brand and the building of the brand image in the past. Moreover, such a community meets the requirements typical of a brand community, such as shared awareness, the presence of rituals and traditions, sense of

moral duty towards the community and its members (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Then we study the image heritage and the consumer engagement towards the brand and the community, of the online brand community of Leroy Merlin. In this work, the image heritage is the brand image built by the consumer in the past (Rindell, 2007, 2013; Rindell *et al.*, 2010; Rindell and Iglesias, 2014). It has got a omnitemporal nature, which means that the experiences made about the brand in the past, influence the brand image today, as well as the future expectations about the brand itself. The image heritage is identified by the constructs showed in table 1.

*Tab. 1: The constructs of the image heritage*

Image heritage	Description
Time span of awareness	Period to which consumers’ awareness of the history and previous activities of the brand date back
Content of earlier experiences	Memories connected with the brand and derived from different sources (personal and/or others’ experiences), according to which the consumer builds and reconstructs the brand image
Key temporal focus	Specific time and/or special event of the recent or past history of the brand, on which the building of the brand image by the consumer, is based.

Source: based on Rindell (2007, 2013); Rindell, Edvardsson, Strandvik, (2010); Rindell, Iglesias (2014)

The consumer engagement within an online brand community, consists of specific experiences of interaction between consumers and brands and/or between consumers and other members of the community (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). The engagement, then, refers to two subjects (brand and community) and two levels of interaction (consumers and brands; consumers and other members of the community). The engagement is distinguished in types referring to the consumer engagement towards the brand and the community within an online brand community (Dessart *et al.*, 2015, 2016) (Tab. 2).

*Tab. 2: The consumer brand /community engagement: the types of engagement*

Consumer brand/community engagement	Description	Sources
Affective engagement	Emotions and feelings experienced on a lasting and recurrent basis, by the consumer towards the brand/community	Calder <i>et al.</i> (2013)
Cognitive engagement	Lasting and active states of mind of the consumer towards the brand/community	Hollebeek (2013); Mollen and Wilson, (2010)
Behavioural engagement	Behaviours towards the brand/community due to motivational drives	Brodie <i>et al.</i> (2011); Gummerus <i>et al.</i> (2012)

Source: based on Dessart *et al.* (2015, 2016)

### 3.3 Methodology

#### 3.3.1 The sampling process

The population being the subject of our study ( $N$ ) is taken from the Italian community “Impara, fai, condividi” of Leroy Merlin and is made up of the members who, during the period of investigation, play the role of the insiders. The latter, according to Kozinets (2010), are old authoritative members, having strong social ties within the community. The resulting database, therefore, includes 170 units.

In order to determine the sample size ( $n$ ), we thought it would be appropriate to fix the degree of reliability required, at 95%, therefore the normal standardized variable assumes a value equal to 1.96; a pilot survey, carried out on a limited number of units, had caused a standard deviation of 0.5%; finally, a value of 5% was assigned to the maximum permissible error. At this point, we calculated the sample size according to the formula provided for continuous variables within a defined population. Then a sample made up of 118 units, was considered quite large and representative of the population being the subject of our study.

The selected sampling procedure is of a probabilistic kind, so that the introduction of units within the sample is the consequence of the application of mathematic rules and not of the discretion of operators. We choose, in particular, the simple casual sampling, without repetition, so that all the units within the population have a recognized and equal probability of being included within the sample, but each unit cannot be included more than once within the sample. Starting from the complete list of the population, which is available on registering into the community, each unit within this list is given a number. By consulting the table of casual numbers, the  $n$  numbers, corresponding to the units bound to form the sample, are obtained.

#### 3.3.2 Data collection

Before carrying out the collection of data, all the units of the sample are contacted within the virtual space of the community, with the purpose of briefly presenting them the research and its goals. Such preliminary phase is positively concluded when 100 units show their willingness to collaborate at the investigation.

Within the following six months, the primary data is collected by interviews via Skype, lasting 10 minutes on the average and carried out by the help of a special questionnaire. The latter includes a whole of 12 closed-ended questions, distributed in the different sections devoted to the image heritage, the engagement towards the brand, the engagement towards the community and the information on the interviewed person.

The data collected by a questionnaire are distributed within two crosstabs of 3x3 size: one of them shows the categories of the variable image heritage in the line and the category of the variable consumer brand engagement in the column; the other one shows the categories of the variable image heritage in the line and the categories of the variable consumer community engagement in the column. The two crosstabs are analyzed separately, in order to establish if the two variables of each table (image heritage and consumer brand engagement; image heritage and consumer community engagement) are independent, that is if no relationship exists between them, in the sense that the distribution of a variable does not influence the distribution of the other and viceversa (Barile and Metallo, 2002).

The Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test is an objective criterion on which a relationship between two nominal variables can be affirmed (Corbetta, 2003). With this purpose, we suggest the  $H_0$  null hypothesis, of lack of relationship between variables (image heritage and consumer brand engagement; image heritage and consumer community engagement), which result to be independent. We try to demonstrate that this statement is false. If the demonstration is successful, the alternative hypothesis  $H_1$  is accepted. According to it, a relationship that is a dependence, really exists between the two variables.

#### 4. Results and discussion

The investigation, carried out on a sample of 100 insiders of the Italian community “Impara, fai, condividi” of Leroy Merlin, shows an interesting result. From the point of view of the consumer, it demonstrates a strict link between the brand image in the past and the engagement towards the brand and the community.

##### 4.1 Image heritage and consumer brand engagement

In order to understand the link between the brand image built in the past by the consumer and the engagement towards the brand, we focus our attention above all on the results of the falsification of the null hypothesis. They are obtained by calculating the real frequencies found in the data and the frequencies we would expect in case of lack of relationship (Tab. 3).

In this regard, we found that no expected frequency was lower than 1 in the crosstab under consideration, as well as it was not lower than 5, in more than the 20% of the cells within the same table (Preacher, 2001). Because of this, the higher reliability of the Chi-square test and thus, its significance, are not compromised.

The Chi-square test (Tab. 4) shows how it is not possible to accept the null hypothesis of independence between the variables image heritage and consumer brand engagement. The observed value of  $\chi^2$ , then, results to be higher than its critical value. This occurs according to 4 degrees of freedom at a level of significance of 1%, that is well fixed, because the number of cases ranges between 100 and 500 (Robasto, 2014).

Tab. 3: Image heritage and consumer brand engagement: observed frequencies and expected frequencies according to the null hypothesis  $H_0$  of independence

Image heritage	Consumer brand engagement			Total
	Affective	Cognitive	Behavioural	
Time span of awareness	20 15.17 (1.54)	9 10.66 (0.26)	12 15.17 (0.66)	41
Content of earlier experiences	15 12.21 (0.64)	12 8.8 (1.36)	6 12.21 (3.16)	33
Key temporal focus	2 9.62 (6.04)	5 6.76 (0.46)	19 9.62 (9.15)	26
Total	37	26	37	100

In italics the expected frequencies; Between brackets the  $\chi^2$  values of each cell

Source: own elaboration

Tab. 4: Image heritage and consumer brand engagement: Chi-square independence test

Chi-square (observed value)	23.258
Chi-square (critical value)	13.277
GDL	4
p-value	0.00011245
alpha	0.01

Source: own elaboration

A further reason for refusing the null independence hypothesis is given by the *p-value*, the value of which results to be lower than alpha. This means, once again, that the value of the Chi-square observed is higher than the critical Chi-square.

If the null hypothesis  $H_0$  of lack of relationship is rejected, its alternative is automatically accepted, that is the  $H_1$  hypothesis sustaining the existence of a relationship between the image heritage and the consumer brand engagement. In other terms, in an online brand community, the consumer engagement towards the brand depends on the brand image that he built in the past.

Since the Chi-square is significant, the analysis goes on with the calculation of the standardized residuals, in order to identify the cells deviating from the independence (Tab. 5).

Tab. 5: Image heritage and consumer brand engagement: the standardized residuals

Image heritage	Consumer brand engagement		
	Affective	Cognitive	Behavioural
Time span of awareness	1.24	-0.50	-0.81
Content of earlier experiences	0.79	1.17	-1.77
Key temporal focus	-2.45*	-0.67	3.02*

\* = the value of the residual ( $r$ ) is significant with  $r > 2$  or with  $r < -2$

Source: own elaboration

Table 5 shows that the cells causing dependence between the variables of image heritage and consumer brand engagement are two. In the cell obtained from the crossing of the key temporal focus and the affective consumer brand engagement, the value of the standardized residual is lower than -2. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that the frequencies observed are significantly lower than the expected ones (Marchioro, 2013). On the contrary, in the cell obtained from the crossing of the key temporal focus with the behavioural consumer brand engagement, the value of the standardized residual is higher than 2. Therefore it is fair to say that the observed sequences are significantly higher than the expected ones (Marchioro, 2013). In this case, the value of such a residual overcomes 3, which is to be intended as a very strong evidence against independence (Porcu, 2008).

After having affirmed the existence between the two variables under consideration, we go on estimating their intensity, by Cramer's V index. From the calculation of this index we obtain a result of 0.3, which shows a significant dependence (Iezzi, 2014) between the image heritage and the consumer brand engagement.

#### 4.2 Image heritage and consumer community engagement

To understand the link between the building of the brand image in the past and the engagement towards the community by the consumer, we focus above all our attention upon the results of the falsification of the null hypothesis. They are obtained by calculating the real frequencies found in the data and the frequencies we would expect in case of lack of relationship (Tab. 6). In this regard, we have found that no expected frequency was lower than 1 in the crosstab under consideration, as well as it was not lower than 5 in more than the 20% of the cells within the same table (Preacher, 2001). Because of this, the higher power of the Chi-square test and, thus, its possible significance, are not compromised.

Tab. 6: Image heritage and consumer community engagement: frequencies observed and expected frequencies under the null hypothesis  $H_0$  of independence

Image heritage	Consumer community engagement			Total
	Affective	Cognitive	Behavioural	
Time span of awareness	6 12.32 (3.24)	15 7.84 (6.54)	7 7.84 (0.09)	28
Content of earlier experiences	20 17.60 (0.33)	4 11.20 (4.63)	16 11.20 (2.06)	40
Key temporal focus	18 14.08 (1.09)	9 8.96 (0.00)	5 8.96 (1.75)	32
Total	44	28	28	100

In italics the expected frequencies; Between brackets the values of  $\chi^2$  of each cell

Source: own elaboration

The Chi-square test (Tab. 7) shows how it is not possible to accept the null hypothesis of independence between the variables of image heritage and consumer community engagement. The observed value of  $\chi^2$ , results, then, to be higher than its critical value. This takes place for 4 degrees of freedom at the significant level of 1%, well fixed, since the number of cases ranges between 100 and 500 (Robasto, 2014).

Tab. 7: Image heritage and consumer community engagement:  
 Chi-square independence test

Chi-square (observed value)	19.726
Chi-square (critical value)	13.277
GDL	4
<i>p-value</i>	0.00056559
alpha	0.01

Source: own elaboration

A further reason for rejecting the null hypothesis of independence is represented by the p-value, the value of which results to be lower than alpha. This means that the observed Chi-square has got a value higher than that of the critical Chi-square.

If the null hypothesis  $H_0$  of lack of relationship is rejected, its alternative is automatically accepted, that is the hypothesis  $H_1$  which sustains the existence of a relationship between the image heritage and the consumer community engagement. In other terms, within an online brand community, the consumer engagement towards the community depends on the brand image he built in the past.

Because of the fact that the Chi-square is significant, the analysis goes on with the calculation of the standardized residuals, in order to identify the cells deviating from the independence. Table 8 shows that the cells causing dependence between the variables of image heritage and consumer community engagement are two. In the cell given by the crossing of the time span of awareness with the cognitive consumer community engagement, the value of the standardized residual is higher than 2.

Tab. 8: Image heritage and consumer community engagement:  
 the standardized residuals

Image heritage	Consumer community engagement		
	Affective	Cognitive	Behavioural
Time span of awareness	-1.80	2.55*	-0.3
Content of earlier experiences	0.57	-2.15*	1.43
Key temporal focus	1.04	0.01	-1.32

\* = the value of the residual (r) is significant with  $r > 2$  or with  $r < -2$

Source: own elaboration

Therefore, it is fair to say that the observed frequencies are significantly higher than the expected ones (Marchioro, 2013). On the contrary, in the cell resulting from the crossing of the content of earlier experiences

with the cognitive consumer community engagement, the value of the standardized residual is lower than -2. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that the frequencies observed are significantly lower than the expected ones (Marchioro, 2013).

After having affirmed the existence of a relationship between the two variables under consideration, we go on estimating its intensity, by Cramer's V index. From the calculation of the index we obtain a result equal to 0.3, which shows a significant dependence (Iezzi, 2014) between the image heritage and the consumer community engagement.

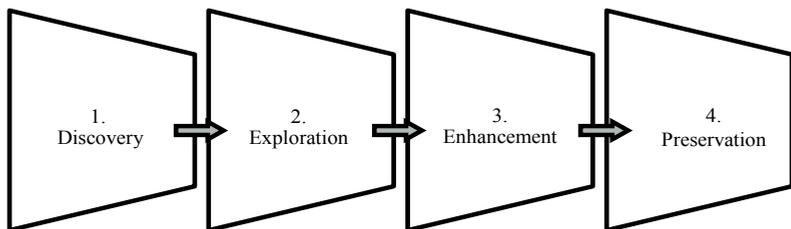
## 5. Conclusions

The sampling investigation verifies the two research hypotheses, previously formulated with reference to the online community of the Leroy Merlin brand. A significant dependence between the image heritage and the consumer brand engagement, on one side, and between the image heritage and the consumer community engagement, on the other side, is found.

The proven existence of such relationships leads to the introduction of the Consumer Image Heritage Engagement (CIHE). It is a new concept embodying the two starting constructs, thus giving applicability both to the brand and the online community. However, we suggest an integrated framework for the efficient management of the CIHE. The framework consists of four fundamental steps (Fig. 1), implying a point of view from the outside (the consumer) towards the inside (brand). A point of view focused on the consumer prosumer, more and more involved in different activities of a co-creative kind, is the background of the framework fundamental steps. Such point of view, then, is the necessary, but not the only needed condition for an optimum CIHE management.

The first step is *discovery*. It consists of the identification and collection of all that lives in the mind of the members of the community as regards the history of the brand and the branding activities carried out by the firm over time. Such discovery allows to define the brand image heritage belonging to the online community.

Fig. 1: Integrated framework for the CIHE management



Source: own elaboration

Then there is *exploration*, as the second step. It aims at determining the logic with which the members of the community built the brand image in the past, which keeps its importance and significance also in the present and future brand image. The exploration also provides the identification and minimization of the possible discrepancies between the point of view of the firm about the brand history and the branding activities implemented over time, compared with the interpretations made by the consumer. Not disclosed or unsolved discrepancies compromise a good CIHE management.

The third step is represented by the *enhancement* of the image heritage as driver for the creation of value in favour of the brand and of the community. As regards the brand, to enhance the image heritage is a non conventional way to gain the loyalty of consumers, besides the possibilities offered by the relational marketing and the traditional loyalty gaining strategies. As regards the community, instead, to enhance the image heritage means to turn it into a new element to share, meant for creating, increasing and keeping the links between the members of the community.

Preservation is the fourth step, focused on the preservation of the brand image heritage, on which the firm can build and develop a strong and distinguishing brand. The protective action is as wide as to include the set of interactive relationships inside the community, which also need to be preserved, since the interaction is a condition for the existence of the community.

This work offers an original contribution from a theoretical-conceptual point of view. It is the first attempt to identify and analyze the relationship between the building of the brand image by the consumer in the past, and his engagement towards the brand and the online community in the sector of large-scale distribution. In addition to this, there are the introduction of a new concept called Consumer Image Heritage Engagement (CIHE) and the creation of an integrated framework with which to manage it in an effective and efficient way. A wide analytical approach is also adopted as regards the consumer engagement, considering its dualism towards the brand and the community. In this way, the study of the link between the image heritage and the consumer engagement is dealt with enough conceptual depth.

However, this work also offers a contribution from a pragmatic-managerial point of view. What is more important, this paper helps the firm's brand managers to be aware that: the consumer engagement towards the brand and towards the online community managed by the brand itself, depends on the brand image built by the consumer in the past. Such statement implies an important marketing implication: no kind of consumer engagement can be carried out, by ignoring or underestimating the necessity of a not improvised management of the image heritage. In these terms, the integrated framework for the CIHE management, represents an important tool in the hands of the firm's managers, in order to discover, explore, enhance and preserve the image heritage for the consumer engagement.

Even if the considerations made up to this point are interesting for the scholars of this subject and for the stakeholders of the large-scale

distribution, this study is characterized by some limits. First of all, the Chi-square value strongly depends on the sample size. This reduces the utility of the Chi-square test in the presence of a high number of cases, which in this case does not overcome the number of one hundred. The possibility of generalizing findings is limited over time and space. Because of the fact that the community is a social continuously developing phenomenon, the evidences being discussed concern the Leroy Merlin community during the period in which the study was carried out; this explains the reason for the above mentioned time limit. The space limit, instead, is due to two factors: first, to the consumer engagement which depends on the analysis context; secondly, to the decision of focusing the analysis solely on the Italian brand community. The multinational dimension of Leroy Merlin will allow, in the future, to extend the investigation to the brand communities of other countries, in order to find, at an international level, the relationship between image heritage and consumer engagement.

A further development of the study could be not only that of assuming the point of view of the consumer, but also that of the other relevant stakeholders and of investigating not only the community created and managed by the brand, but also the communities spontaneously created by consumers. Likewise, the research can be developed by analyzing not only the perceived image, but also the remaining levels of analysis of the brand image (real image, desired image) and without considering the environments (the real and the virtual one) of the brand community separately, but as to be investigated at the same time within the online and offline context.

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