« Disclosure of unethical and/or fraudulent practices of brands on the consumer. Revolt or passive collaboration? »

Original research question: « Divulgation de pratiques non éthiques et/ou frauduleuses de marques sur le consommateur. Révolte ou collaboration passive? »

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INTRODUCTION

According to Keller (2012), the interest in consumer brand relationships continues to grow from both academics and practitioners as we all have a range of different types of relationships with brands of products and services that enter our lives one way or another. According to McAlexander, Schouten, & Koening (2002), some essential relationships include those between the customer and the brand, between the customer and the firm, between the customer and the product in use, and along with fellow customers. Those relationships can be seen as gravitating around the brands in general, at the centre.

What would be interesting to figure out, and this is the aim of this work, would be to investigate how the relationship between the brands and its consumer might affect the reactions of those last ones after negative information is disclosed. This would be relevant as according to Fournier (1998) brands can and do serve as possible relationship partners.

As it can be read in Liu, Wang, & Wu (2010) negative information about brands and companies are standard in the market-place. According to Vanhamme & Grobben (2008), an essential amount of real-life examples (e.g., IKEA, The Body Shop, Texaco, Nike) bear to show us how fragile company image can be when a corporation is accused publicly of misbehaviour. Still, according to Vanhamme & Grobben (2008), negative information publicised causes in particular damage to how consumers perceive the company and its products, whether the accusations are true or not.

In a way to investigate this research question, we will explore the tendency and details of three crisis case studies to examine the reactions of the consumers about a brand they would have consumed linked to one of those last case studies. We will only focus on accusations which have been verified as founded.

Here are the different starting questions which orientated our study:

"Which is the impact of the brand equity on the kind of response consumers might have about negative information disclosed about a brand they would have consumed recently?"

"Do consumers tend to change their habits of consumption after they have acknowledged some unethical and/or fraudulent practice(s) from a brand affecting the products or services they consume?"

"Which are the moderators affecting the attitudes of a consumer towards a brand he is usually consuming, after having been acquainted with some recent unethical, or fraudulent practice(s), affecting the products or services from this brand?"

It might be interesting to note that in the market-place there are different types of goods and services, with some tending to "oblige" individuals to consume them because of some personal reasons as dependency or illness. What then if there is no alternative to this type of consumption, will the consumer be affected in the same way for unethical behaviours of those firms? Though it might have been an interesting orientation of our research, we decided that we would not take into account in our reasoning the products or services which are part of an obligation to consume like medical or other. We will focus on products or services linked to a brand for which consumers have the choice between different alternatives, as the variations between those consumers should be of a more prominent tendency.

We will start by a theoretical framework where we will define the concepts and the vocabulary on which this research will be based. We will then analyse the different reactions consumers might have after the disclosure of negative information on a brand they would have consumed, based on the literature. This will depend on different factors and different bonds linked to different levels of brand associations they would have with the brand. A process about those reactions will be presented at the end of the theoretical framework. The literature will help us also to identify as best the type of case to investigate and the type of brand. For instance, brands linked to products will be chosen to be investigated.

The second part will be the method of analysis, where we will first justify the choice of the brands and the cases. We will then analyse the cases in detail to know as best what is behind those cases as some consumers of those brands might have investigated the facts as well. We will analyse the evolution of the sales after the disclosure of the case, as, linked to an analysis of the facts, we will be then able to present disclosure of the case as objective and accurate as possible to the consumers. Before analysing the reactions of the consumers on the cases, we will first implement a qualitative study which will help us to know better the possible reactions of the different types of consumers. Then we will launch a quantitative study on consumers aged between 25 and 65 year-olds.

The hedonic and utilitarian characteristics of a brand will be analysed as being decisive in the reaction of the consumers after the disclosure of a negative case linked to the brand.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Unethical and fraudulent practices

Definition of the terms and of the concepts linked

Unethical practices

The Collins dictionary defines unethical as an adjective which means “morally wrong”. An unethical practice would be then defined as a morally wrong practice. According to Cavanagh (2009) behaviours and practices are linked, as practices are composed of behaviours. The authors Lasthuizen, Huberts, & Heres (2011) mentioned unethical behaviours (forming unethical practices) as a synonym to “integrity violations” (p. 384), including corruption. The last authors define integrity as “the quality of acting in accordance with relevant moral values, norms, and rules.” (p. 387), showing that an integrity violation will then be a violation of the moral values, norms, and rules. Still, according to those authors, the moral nature of these values and norms would be referred to as “what is judged as right, just, or good conduct” (p. 387). Values are defined as “principles that carry a certain weight in one’s choice of action (what is good to do, or bad to refrain from doing)” (p.387). While norms indicate morally correct behaviours in certain situations (Lasthuizen, Huberts, & Heres, 2011).

We would argue that a practice, in general, would stem from a decision to behave in this way. An unethical decision has then been defined by Jones (1991) as a decision which is “either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community”. Still according to Jones (1991), some specific organisational factors, including the organisational culture, the organisational strategy, information technology, training, and organisational performance (Ekore, 2014), may cause unethical behaviours to result despite good intention.

Fraudulent practices

As it might be read in the Collins dictionary, a fraud is a “deliberate deception or cheating intended to gain an advantage”. According to Button, Lewis, & Tapley (2009), the term fraud covers a wide range of behaviours, linked together by the deceit characteristic and embracing a broad scope of different crimes, having as an intention to end up with some form of gain.

Fraudulent, still according to Collins dictionary, is an adjective about “acting with intent to deceive”. A fraudulent practice would be then a practice with the intention to deceive. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD, n.d.) confirms this definition by specifying a fraudulent practice as “any action or omission, including misrepresentation, that knowingly or recklessly misleads, or attempts to mislead, a party to obtain a financial benefit or to avoid an obligation.” (p.1).

Common features and differences

Contrarily to a fraudulent practice embracing a specific crime being recognised then as illegal, unethical behaviours, according to Gomez-Mejia & Balkin (2002), may not be unlawful in some circumstances as business ethics are different from laws. This helps to bring coherence to the precedent definition of Jones (1991).

At this stage, according to those past definitions, we can assert that a fraudulent practice will usually be an unethical practice in the meantime. Though, a morally wrong method, so an unethical practice could correctly not be a fraudulent practice in the meantime. This will be confirmed in the typology chapter.

Crisis or scandal?

An interesting question might appear at this stage: do unethical and/or fraudulent practices, once they have been disclosed, leading to a crisis, or a scandal?

A scandal is a noun defined by the Collins dictionary as “shame or outrage arising from a disgraceful action or event”. While a crisis “a crucial stage or turning point in the course of anything”, also “a time of extreme trouble or danger”. An organisation crisis is defined by Pearson & Clair (1998) as “a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organisation and is characterised by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (p. 60). They have been considered according to Coombs (2014) as inflicting harm on organisation’s reputation, based on Barton (2001, as cited in Coombs, 2014) researches, because of the negative information it generates about the organisation. As a result, according to those definitions, the disclosure of unethical and/or fraudulent practices would lead to a crisis, but not especially a scandal as this concept seems already subject to interpretation according to each.

An organisation reputation is defined by Sohn & Lariscy (2012) as “the result of a history of positive performance or good relations with stakeholders” (p. 251, 252). Fombrun, Gardberg, & Barnett (2000) give another definition of corporate reputation, based on Fombrun & Shanley’s (1990) research, as “a cognitive representation of a company’s actions and results that crystallises the firm’s ability to deliver valued outcomes to its stakeholders” (p. 87).

Cognitive representations for consumers are part of the three components of the attitude. Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) defined the attitude as a "learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object" (p. 6). Brassington & Pettitt (2006) defined the three dimensions of the attitude shortly, attributing the cognitive as "beliefs or disbeliefs", while the second dimension of the attitude named the affective as the "feelings of emotional involvement", and thirdly the conative as the "attitudes leading to behaviour".

Revolt and passive collaboration

Definition from a consumption point of view

A revolt is defined by the Collins dictionary as "a rebellion or uprising against authority", also "to cause to feel disgusted".

The Cambridge dictionary defines collaboration as "the act of working together with other people or organisations to create or achieve something". While the adjective passive is defined as "not taking an active part, not participating perceptively in an activity, organisation, etc." and "unresisting and receptive to external forces; submissive". The Collins dictionary defined submissive as "showing quiet obedience".

A passive collaboration would then be the act of working together with other people or organisations but in the meantime not taking an active part, not participating perceptively. The two concepts together, according to the different definitions, emphasise the fact to act or not in a hidden way from others, showing quiet obedience.

Revolt and passive collaboration for a consumer towards a brand

Aaker (1991) defines a brand as "a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors." However, a brand has been recognised as being more than just a name given to a product, as it embodies a whole set of physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs (Simões & Dibb, 2001). Therefore, it is also:

> A customer experience represented by a collection of images and ideas; (…). Brand recognition and other reactions are created by the accumulation of experiences with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary. (American Marketing Association)

According to Mike Dempsey, founder of the Studio Dempsey (as cited in Montgomery, 2015), awarded in 1994 as Royal Designer for Industry by the British Royal Society of Arts, a brand is an identity. It is also:

> The total personality of an organisation: what it does, how it behaves and how it communicates to its customers and various audiences in all of its manifestations. Good brands want to connect with their customers on an emotional level so that they become loved and trusted. (…) A brand is a two-way connection between the giver and the receiver. If the organisation is loved and consistently reliable, you will forgive them if they make the occasional mistake just like you would a friend - it's called loyalty. (Montgomery, 2015)

This definition, while talking about an organisation, might well be applied to a corporation or a company. Corporate personality in general, according to Berens & Van Riel (2004), is part of the three concepts characterising the corporate associations, forming the corporate reputation in the consumer’s mind. According to Keller & Richey (2006) what a company is and how it presents itself to the consumer are defined by its corporate brand personality, establishing the corporate brand personality as a form of brand personality specific to a corporate brand. According to Keller (2013), a corporate brand is distinct from a product brand in that it can embody a much wider range of associations, those associations having the potential to have a substantial effect on the brand equity and market performance of the individual products from this corporate brand. This idea has been confirmed by Aaker (1991), who emphasised that brand equity is supported by the associations that consumers form in their minds about the brand. Still, according to Keller (2013), a corporate brand gives the opportunity for firms to powerfully express themselves in a way that is not tied to their specific products or services. As a result, corporate brands: differentiate organisations from their competitors; arouse loyalty from a wide range of stakeholder groups and networks; gives a brand leverage opportunity to an organisation in a way to explore new markets or product categories (Balmer, 2001).

Consumer brand love and loyalty will be detailed further on.

Brand trust has been defined by Delgado Ballester, Munuera-Alemán, & Yagüe (2003) as “the confident expectations of the brand’s reliability and intentions in situations entailing risk to the consumer” (p. 37). Still, according to Delgado Ballester, Munuera-Alemán, & Yagüe (2003), this implies that once a brand is trusted it is, as a consequence, considered as an active relational partner for the consumer, justified by the fact that brands are not just passive objects as they are personalised and animated. For Elliott & Yannopoulou (2007) a brand could be seen as an active member of the consumer-brand relationship through the activities of the employees who manage it, which is further confirming the definition of Mike Dempsey.

The Collins dictionary defines a consumer as “a person who buys goods or uses services”, while the American Marketing Association defined it with additional concepts, as “traditionally, the ultimate user or consumer of goods, ideas, and services.”

As a result of those past definitions, we can assert that a brand tends to create a relationship with its consumers, who, once it is succeeded, accordingly “feel” the brand as they will have developed different kinds of emotion for it. A revolt against a brand would be then a rebellion for the consumer against its authority, so an uprising against the sentiment that this brand could create on him. A passive collaboration toward a brand for a consumer would be quiet obedience against its authority.

Typology

Unethical practices

The result of the researches of Lasthuizen, Huberts, & Heres (2011) showed that the typology of integrity violations in the organisation context includes, in addition to corruption, the unethical conducts related to the performance of duties or directed to the organisation and its members, plus also the misconducts during private time. In their table (see details in Appendix 1), different levels of seriousness of unethical behaviour can be distinguished, depending on the distance to the norm and values. In this table, it can be seen that fraud is only one type of unethical behaviour upon many. Dalman, Buche, & Min (2017) from their side divided the degree of gravity of the unethical practices from low to high.

Some examples according to Liu, Wang, & Wu (2010) include: the Dow Corning’s release of potentially harmful silicone breast implants (Lam & Hurry, 1992), the Sears Auto Service’s overbilling practices (Hoffman & Siguaw, 1993), the MetLife’s misleading sales tactics (Staff and Wire Service Reports, 1994), and Nike and Wal-Mart which have been reported to be using child and sweatshop labour (Clark, 1996).

Moderate and high unethical practices from a brand

In the retail sector some unethical practices have been identified by Liu, Wang, & Wu (2010) as: a moderately unethical action from brands would be not to apply the same promotion to all items in the store even though the company had communicated that promise; an extremely high unethical situation would be to sell expired products that potentially could cause health problems.

According to Dalman, Buche, & Min (2017), high unethical practices carried out by a brand can be, upon others, characterised by taking advantage of child labour, or bribing government officials.

Fraudulent practices

Levi (2008) proposed a table with a typology of fraud by victim category from private to public, subdivided by the form of activity (see Appendix 2). There are many fraud types as it can be observed, though in our study according to our question of research we will focus only on the frauds produced on consumers, comprising under the term "consumer fraud" as it can be seen in the table.

Fraudulent practices in the manufacturing sector

According to Deloitte (2014), the key different fraudulent practices in the manufacturing sectors are: product counterfeiting or grey market/ product substitution; bid-rigging, collusion or price fixation; bribery/ kickbacks; conflicts of interest; warranty claims fraud; intellectual property (IP) infringement; theft or misuse of inventory; vendor, supplier or procurement fraud.

Fraudulent practices in the food sector specifically

Food frauds, according to Moyer, DeVries, & Spink (2017), include acts such as:

> adulteration (e.g., ingredient substitution, dilution, and concealment, or more generally impurities), tampering (e.g., date code tampering and refilling containers), theft (e.g., employee theft, shoplifting, and cargo theft), diversion (e.g., grey markets and parallel trade), unauthorized production, and counterfeiting (e.g., IP rights infringement). (Moyer, DeVries, & Spink, 2017, p. 358)

Still according to Moyer, DeVries, & Spink (2017) food frauds can lead to public health threat and tremendous economic impact for companies or countries. Those last authors have found that there are meagre costs to conduct fraud, where food manufacturers and brand owners are the usual victims of some unknown fraud for whom costs are subsequently higher than the benefits the fraudster made.

Crises

Defining crises according to the cause, Lerbinger (1997, as cited in Gilpin & Murphy, 2008) examined seven types of crisis: natural disaster, technological disaster, confrontation event, crises of malevolence, skewed values, deception, and misconduct.

According to Olawale (2014): natural disasters can be considered as “acts of Gods” (e.g., a tsunami); technological crises are caused by the human application of science and technology as when technology becomes complex coupled with a technological breakdown (e.g., software failures, industrial accidents, oil spills); confrontation events are happening when discontented individuals and/or groups oppose themselves to businesses, government, and various interest groups to win acceptance of their demands and expectations (e.g., boycotts, sit-ins ultimatums, blockade or occupation of buildings); crises of malevolence take place when opponents or immoral individuals use criminal means, or other extreme tactics, for expressing hostility, or seeking gain, from a company, a country or an economic system, possibly with the aim of destabilizing or destroying (e.g., malicious rumours, terrorism, espionage).

Following the study of Lerbinger (1997, as cited in Olawale, 2014), skewed values, deception, and misconduct are specified under the term “organisational misdeeds” when management is at the source of it, called then: the crisis of skewed management values, crisis of deception, and crisis of management misconduct. Lerbinger (1997, as cited in Olawale, 2014) explain the different concepts as follow: skewed management values is the fact to have the managers of an organisation favouring short-term economic gain neglecting broader social values and stakeholders (other than investors); crises of deception occur when managers cover up, or misrepresents, information about themselves and their products in relation to their customers and other stakeholders; crises of management misconduct are caused by skewed values and deception, in addition to a deliberate amorality and illegality.

We will focus in this work on organisational misdeeds, related to a brand.

A brand crisis has been defined by Dawar & Lei (2009) as a well-publicised allegation, claiming that a critical brand proposition is unsubstantiated or false. Still, according to the past authors, these crises can cause severe damage to the brand, regardless of the veracity of the brand-undermining assertions themselves.

According to Jeon & Baeck (2016), brand crises are classified into two types, according to consumer’s perception of corporate associations: the brand crisis associated with the corporate ability (CA), and the brand crisis related to the corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Jun et al., 2011, as cited in Jeon & Baeck, 2016). Still, for Jeon & Baeck (2016), a CA crisis refers mainly to a firm's product quality and its manufacturing capability, whereas a CSR crisis is related to a firm's social obligations.

An unethical practice of a brand should be then typically related to a CSR crisis, while a fraudulent practice to its CA when it will impact its product quality.

How are consumers reacting about a brand crisis?

Attribution of responsibility

Attribution has been defined by Kelly (1967, as cited in Hollyforde & Whiddett, 2002) as the "processes by which an individual interprets events as being caused by a particular part of a relatively stable environment" (Hollyforde & Whiddett, 2002, p. 31). Heider (1958, as cited in Oghojafor, Olayemi, Oluwatula, & Okonji, 2012) asserts that individuals generally explain behaviours in two ways: either they attribute the behaviour to a person, which is categorised as an internal attribution; or they attribute this behaviour to a situation, categorised as an external attribution. According to Weiner (1974, 1986, as cited in Oghojafor, Olayemi, Oluwatula, & Okonji, 2012), the attribution theory assumes that people try to determine why others acted in a certain way, attributing one or more causes to the behaviour(s). According to Coombs (2014), this is because people try to explain and understand why events happen, especially sudden and negative events. Accordingly, a bias effect, called "negativity bias" (Liu, Wang, & Wu, 2010), has been observed, as customers are giving negative information a higher weight in comparison to some extreme positive information (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006).

For Weiner (1974, 1986, as cited in Oghojafor, Olayemi, Oluwatula, & Okonji, 2012) a three-stage process underlies an attribution, which strengthens the two ways explanation of Heider by adding two stages upstream: (1) the behaviour is observed, (2) the behaviour is believed to be intentionally performed, (3) then the behaviour is attributed to an internal cause if the individual believes that the person who has performed the behaviour was not forced to do it, or to an external cause if the individual believes the person was forced to perform it.

Coombs (2014) is suggesting reasoning showing that attributions generate emotions for people, and as people are affected by their emotions even unconsciously it will then impact the way they will interact afterwards with those involved in the event if they attributed to them the responsibility.

On a general matter, Coombs (2014) writes deservedly that most of the time crises are negative as they create damage or threat of damage, and are often sudden. As a result, they create attributions of responsibility where people will either blame the situation or the persons involved as said previously. For a crisis linked to a brand, the persons involved will be the organisation identified as the particular producer. Coombs (2014) continues writing that when people blame an organisation, anger is created and people would react negatively toward the organisation. Different degrees of relation from the consumer with the brand will make him sometimes attributing the responsibility to the situation, even though it is objectively from the part of the organisation that the responsibility is.

Negative chain reaction

An adverse chain reaction to attributing crisis responsibility to an organization has been documented by Coombs (2007, as cited in Coombs 2014) and Coombs & Holladay (2006, as cited in Coombs 2014): an increased damage to an organization's reputation will arise from the adverse emotive reactions from customers, as well as a reduced purchase intention (PI), and an increased likelihood of engaging in negative word-of-mouth (WOM).

The PI has been defined by Spears & Singh (2004) as "an individual's conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a brand" (p. 56). While WOM has been defined traditionally as "oral, person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial concerning a brand, a product, or a service" (Arndt, 1967, p. 3). According to Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol (2005), WOM has a valence which is varied and generally categorised in three states: positive, negative, and neutral. Still, according to Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol (2005), negative WOM is more emotional than the other two states as it is associated with dissatisfaction, while positive WOM is more cognitive. This is confirmed by De Matos & Rossi (2008) who found negative WOM is emotionally based and is transmitted more immediately and to a higher number of people. Those findings assure coherence of the precedent chain reaction, which will be characterised as a revolt towards the organisation in relation with the emotion of disgust generated.

Buffering effect

In Trump (2014), it can be read that consumers may lessen the threat of a brand crisis by buffering their evaluations of the brand. This is related to the information integration theory from Anderson (1981, as cited in Jeon & Baeck, 2016), where it has been seen that if people receive new information that challenges existing attitudes, they will first try to defend these attitudes by seeking for existing information in memory which might be characterised as memory-based associations (Jeon & Baeck, 2016). This is in coherence with Jeon & Baeck (2016) who emphasised that when people are exposed to new negative information that they evaluate and perceive as important, potentially causing a crisis for a brand, their original attitudes toward the brand will affect their new attitudes toward it.

For instance, according to Dawar & Lei (2009), brand familiarity has been considered to act as a buffer against the adverse impact of negative information on brands. When a crisis occurs at a familiar brand, consumers' direct or indirect experiences with the brand will allow them to easily retrieve the pro-attitudinal information, reducing the influence of the crisis information (Dawar & Lei, 2009). According to Dawar & Lei (2009), consumers have been analysed as perceiving then familiar brands to carry less "responsibility" for a crisis, translated into a lesser negative impact on brand evaluations. The results of the study of Krishnan (1996) show that when comparing corporate brands of high and low equity form different sectors, the brands with higher equity were the ones showing the more familiarity and the more associations from consumers' part.

The role of brand equity

Aaker (2013) defines brand equity as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand name and symbol, which add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service.". Keller (1993) defines consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (p. 17). Keller (1993) conceptualised brand knowledge as an associative network memory model based on two components: brand awareness and brand image. Still, according to Keller (1993), CBBE appears when consumers are familiar with a brand and hold some positive, strong, and unique associations with this brand in their mind. We will go through different concepts linked to different degrees of CBBE in a way to see which could be the different reactions of the consumers after negative information of a brand such as unethical and/or fraudulent practices would have been disclosed to them.

Consumers' associations and the corporate reputation

The company reputation is highly related to its CA, as it had been defined by Brown & Dacin (1997) as "those associations related to the company's expertise in producing and delivering its outputs." (p. 68). According to Brown & Dacin (1997) corporate associations, are defined as “all the information about a company that a person holds” (p. 69). Those information form as a total the corporate reputation perceived by individuals (Berens, & Van Riel, 2004).

According to Dawar & Lei (2008) consumers have two main types of associations about a brand arising from a corporation: the benefit associations which are what consumers think the product or service can do for them, providing a central reason for consumer's choice of a specific brand over others in the category; the evaluative associations which are consumers' overall evaluation of a brand, such as brand attitude and brand trust. According to Aaker (1996), the associations that a consumer makes with a brand might include the product attributes, a celebrity spokesperson, or a particular symbol. Still according to Aaker (1996), brand associations are driven by the brand identity, which is equivalent to what the organisation is willing the brand to stand for in customers’ mind. The brand identity is characterised as a mean to encourage a customer to establish a relationship between the brand and himself (Aaker, 1996). For this purpose, a value proposition of that brand should be created including functional, emotional or self-expressive benefits (Aaker, 1996).

Different associations will be detailed in the next sections, showing different effects on consumer’s attitude after negative information would have been disclosed to them.

Brand identification

Brand identification can be characterised as the extent to which consumers see a brand embodying different aspects or attributes which are central to their self-identity (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). This is coherent with the work of Hamouda & Gharbi (2013) where the act of consumption is seen as being in the heart of the process of identity construction. For Astakhova, Swimberghe, & Wooldridge (2017) this congruence between the consumer’s self-image and brand image, defined as a set of brand associations (Keller, 1993), is characterised by the self-congruence theory (also called self-concept) where brands are described as relationship partners for the consumer. It has been categorised from low to high self-congruity (Sirgy et al., 1997). According to James (1890), the Empirical Self of each of us is all that we are tempted to consider under the name of “me”. James (1890) defined a person’s Self as “the sum fatal of all that he CAN call his” (p. 291). According to Sirgy et al. (1997), consumer behaviours can be seen as partly driven by the congruence arising from a psychological comparison between the product-user image, so the image deriving from the product’s consumption and the consumer’s self-concept.

For Sirgy (1982), the self-concept has been conceptualised as having more than one component. In Sirgy (1979), the self-concept is divided actually in four: the actual-self-image (ASI) which is defined as the "degree to which a subject believes that she has a specific image" (p. 53); the ideal-self-image (ISI) defined as the "degree to which a subject would like to have a specific image" (p. 53); the actual social-self-image (ASSI) defined as the "degree to which a subject believes that he is perceived by others as having a specific image" (p. 53); and the ideal social-self-image (ISSI) defined as the "degree to which a subject would like to be perceived by others as having a specific image" (p. 53). This self-congruence theory with those components is coherent with Fournier (1998) who showed that brands adhere to systems that consumers create to give a meaning to their lives, which we could link to their selves.

According to Whan Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci (2010) when the brand offers assets which might be used by a consumer for his self-expansion, he may afterwards develop strong personal connections between the brand and himself, characterised as a relationship by Dalman, Buche, & Min, (2017). In this stage, still according to the results of Whan Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci (2010), consumers might also create mental models of the brand and the self, where strong brand attitudes will develop into brand attachments. Mental models are defined by Norman (2013) as "the conceptual models in people's minds that represent their understanding of how things work" (p. 26). They are models that people create of themselves, others, the environment surrounding them, and the things with which they interact (Norman, 2013) which is represented in our work as brands. Brand attachment is defined by Whan Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci (2010) as "the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self" (p. 2).

Business-to-consumer companies might benefit more from identification than business-to-business companies as those companies are "better known to the general public and provide opportunities for direct consumption, with concomitant opportunities for self-expression" (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Brand users from their side are getting benefits from those relationships by having the opportunity to express their self-image to others through those brands they would possess, which gives them the feeling of some sense of comfort (Dalman, Buche, & Min, 2017). This, as they would have found a particular brand that fits their personality and which can be used instrumentally in helping them express their inner and also social selves (Huber, Meyer, & Schmid, 2015). The self–brand relationship could make up then one piece of the consumer's personality (Trump, 2014). A brand could potentially fit a consumer's personality as a brand personality has been defined by Aaker (1997) as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (p. 347).

Lam, Ahearne, & Schillewaert (2010) mentioned from their side the inner self under the terms “private self”. The two terms are synonyms as, according to Cary (2011), under the modern concepts of the autonomous individual there is a notion of a private inner space of the self, similar to an inner world where the individual can be indeed himself, out of view of others. The past reasoning of Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015) can then be verified and confirmed as Lam, Ahearne, & Schillewaert (2010) showed that a brand is seen as a relationship partner where consumers express their private self-using the brand to define who they are, and, also, where they can express their social self as customers will have the opportunity to consider themselves part of an in-group where other consumers identify themselves with the same brand.

To be identified with a company involves a relationship significant enough to particularly motivate the consumer to maintain the link with the organisation over time (Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz, & Alvarado-Herrera, 2009), and once a brand is chosen, it means it achieved to develop strong brand equity. For this reason, Astakhova, Swimberghe, & Wooldridge (2017) explain in their study that to be chosen Marketers create brands appealing both to the way consumers see themselves, to create a strong emotional bond, and to how they would ideally see themselves as well. Companies benefit accordingly, from an increased consumer loyalty (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Wolter & Cronin, 2016), the ability to charge premium prices (Wolter & Cronin, 2016), and higher positive (or lower negative depending of the situation) WOM intentions from the side of its consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013; Wolter & Cronin, 2016). Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) showed that customers identified with a company might promote it with the intent to recruit other customers, confirmed by the study of Wolter & Cronin (2016) who showed that those customers would recommend the brand to others. Becerra & Badrinarayanan (2013) found accordingly that consumers who are identified with a brand, having formed an attachment with it, will be more likely to engage in actions supporting or defending it, generating positive or oppositional brand referrals. According to Wolter & Cronin (2016), this is because a consumer using a brand to enhance his self will exhibit a bias towards the company, at the expense of understanding it and its actions.

When negative information is spread, after companies had built brand identification with their customers in the past, we can assume that they will rely on those relationships for some support (Ahluwalia et al. 2000; Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006; Tuškej, Golob, &

Podnar, 2013). Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) found in their study that if the degree of self-congruence for the customer is high and a brand either reflects the consumer's personality or enhances his self in the social environment, it will lead to a positive connection translated into a strong emotional response from the consumer regarding that brand. Different studies have demonstrated that brand identification is leading consumers to neglect the negative information disclosed about the brand(s) (Wolter & Cronin, 2016; Liu, Wang, & Wu 2010), or to be resilient to those (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). This means that the consumers' (positive) attitude toward the brand is unaffected by the event, which is consistent with the results of Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner (2012), and Liu, Wang, & Wu (2010). According to Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner (2012), a threat to the brand incites the same defensive responses as a threat to the self. According to the self-affirmation theory proposed firstly by Steele (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007) in the 80s, people react to threats to the self in a way that allows them to maintain a positive self-view which allows them to reduce the dissonance that arises when the self is in question (Steele & Liu, 1983, as cited in Trump, 2014). According to Sherman & Cohen (2006), under the self-affirmation theory, when the self-integrity is threatened, people can re-establish their self-integrity through the affirmations of alternative domains of self-worth, unrelated to the provoking threat, as an indirect defence. This is supported by Sherman & Cohen (2006) who wrote that this idea showing people as ego defensive resounds both in psychological researches and lay wisdom. Steele (1988, as cited in Sherman & Cohen, 2006) gives as a reason the fact that individuals have a sense of themselves as good, virtuous, successful, and with the ability to control important life's outcomes. According to the results of Sohn & Lariscy (2012), this reaction is usually happening for CA crises, which led participants to discount negative information about the crisis using positive information of a favourable prior reputation. This type of effect has been recognised as belonging to the cognitive dissonance theory of Festinger (Sohn & Lariscy, 2012). This type of attitude of the consumer is equally following the study of Schmalz & Orth (2012), where it was the strength of the cognitive and emotional bond between the brand with the self which was motivating consumers to bias judgments against the negative information disclosed about a brand.

While this effect has been generalised by Sohn & Lariscy (2012) as being applied to CA crises, according to Dalman, Buche, & Min (2017) the results showing unaffected attitude toward the brand after negative information disclosed are only valid for CSR crises when the negative information spread is about an unethical situation from a low to moderate level according to customer's mind. This is equally in accordance with the study of Schmalz & Orth (2012), who presented that when the negative news is extremely unethical, a strongly attached consumer will judge firm ethics as negatively as would do a weakly attached consumer, showing then negative corporate associations and negative behavioural intentions as well (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006). This is in coherence with the studies of the authors Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins (2006) and Liu, Wang, & Wu (2010) who found that when the information disclosed about the company is highly negative, the positive impacts from the company identification relationship tend to disappear as consumers can no longer tolerate those adverse actions. Those reactions are consistent with the study Mazar, Amir, & Ariely (2008) showing that people have the desire to think of themselves as honest human beings. We can link those results with the ones of Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner (2012), for which we could suppose that to a certain extent the consumers would not be able anymore to see the threat of the brand as a threat to the self.

Brand love

According to Caroll & Ahuvia (2006), brand love is defined as “the degree of passionate a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” (p. 81). Love includes according to them the “passion for the brand, attachment to the brand, positive evaluation of the brand, positive emotions in response to the brand, and declarations of love for the brand” (p. 81). Brand passion has been defined by Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2013) as “a psychological construct comprised of excitation, infatuation, and obsession for a brand.” (p. 905). According to the study results of Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2013), brand passion has been seen to be positively influenced by brand identification and also, though to a lesser degree, by brand trust. Trust has been seen by Berens & Van Riel (2004) as one of the other central concepts of the corporate associations. The intervention of brand trust on brand passion, linked to brand love, could be caused by the fact that trust may develop early in a brand relationship context as few interactions may be sufficient to develop trust in a brand (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2013). Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015) demonstrated in their study that a passionate feeling for a brand primarily arises when it is capable of reflecting the consumer’s personality, characterised as an ASI. Moreover, then also, but secondarily, when the brand raises an individual’s self within his social environment, so an ASSI and ISSI. Those last authors had based their study on the results of Hwang & Kandampully (2012), who found that the self-concept connection is a crucial antecedent of emotional attachment and brand love, confirmed by Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2013) and the results of Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen (2010).

Brand love is characterised as the most influential relationship consumers could form with a brand, as it the most intense emotion one might perceive for a brand, similar as within a person-to-person relationship (Shimp & Madden, 1988). Arising from the triangular theory of (interpersonal) love from Stenberg (comprising intimacy, passion, and commitment), Whang, Allen, Sahoury, & Zhang (2004) argued in addition that the feeling of love towards a brand can be highly similar to an interpersonal love within a romantic relationship, using an interpersonal love scale. However, Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2009) mentioned rightly that love is a vibrant and intricate phenomenon linked to feelings, which means it appears difficult that to linking it to an interpersonal theory when applying it to objects or brands will capture all of its particular sense. Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi (2012) agree that using an interpersonal theory before creating scale items, in a way to apply it, might present some potential problems if brand love is not directly comparable with the particular theory of interpersonal love chosen. However, according to those last authors, brand love can be of many sorts, and can still be a "real" type of love, even if it is different from an interpersonal love (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). This is coherent with the study of Whang, Allen, Sahoury, & Zhang, (2004) who noted that a significant difference between an interpersonal love and a brand love is that an interpersonal love is an outcome of a bidirectional interaction, while love for an item such as a product or a brand is a unidirectional one.

Brand love leads to the same favourable outcomes for the brand as brand identification, though with an increased magnitude (at least for the WOM), and some additional features as well. Those outcomes are: higher brand loyalty (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2009, 2013; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010) which has been seen to produce a higher willingness from the part of the consumer to pay a price premium (Bauer, Heinrich, & Martin, 2007; Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2013), trust (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2009), and positive WOM (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Bauer, Heinrich, & Martin, 2007; Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2009, 2013) deriving from an active engagement (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). Oliver (1999) defined brand loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour" (p. 34). While active engagement, defined by Keller (2001) as possibly "the strongest affirmation of brand loyalty" (p. 15), occurring when customers are eager to devote time, energy, money, or other resources into the brand beyond those employed during the purchase or consumption of the brand. Consumer engagement (CE) is defined by Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić (2011) as "a psychological state, which occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal agent/object within specific service relationships" (p. 260), an agent or object potentially characterised by a brand.

A study of Fetscherin, Boulanger, Gonçalves Filho, & Quiroga Souki (2014) from a sample of consumers in Brazil about different product categories from cars, to mobile phones, shoes, and soft drinks, showed the result that any brand could theoretically establish and achieve a "love" type relationship with consumers. Those last authors are describing additionally that this result had already been practically illustrated with other examples from famous brands such as Harley Davidson, Apple or Starbuck. Noting that those three loved brands were coming from entirely different product categories (Fetscherin, Boulanger, Gonçalves Filho, & Quiroga Souki, 2014).

Another study by Long-Tolbert & Gammoh (2012) showed that brand love could also be applied to face-to-face interaction services. For this category of service, they found the results that specific employee behaviours and events can reinforce an image of consistent performance across the different interpersonal aspects of the service delivery, which would result in emotional ties with the customers, translated at a high point as brand love.

A recent study by Dalman, Buche, & Min (2017) showed that when a consumer has a love for a brand, he will support it by either: purposefully avoiding talking about the unethical situation that might have affected it, which can be called a sin of omission; or, he will actively defend it towards other consumers, which is characterised as a brand defence. The sin of omission would be seen as a passive collaboration from the consumption point of view, while the brand defence as an active collaboration. This brand defence is consistent with the research of Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava (2000) where they found out that commitment is a significant moderator of consumers' response to negative information, in the way that consumers who are committed to a brand intuitively counter-argue the negative information which might emerge about that brand.

As it can be read from Riivits-Arkonsuo, Kaljund, & Leppiman, (2014) passionate consumers, identified and who are committed to the brand can even become brand evangelists, though only if there has been a development of brand trust previously in their mind (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Becerra & Badrinarayanan (2013) have defined in their study that, not only brand evangelism makes consumers demonstrating their support for the brand by purchasing it, they also provide positive referrals about it (positive WOM) characterised as customer referrals (CR). Customers who would have become a brand evangelist will also openly be opposed to rival brands (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Becerra & Badrinarayanan (2013) highlight that brand trust is a must, as it alleviates the perceived risk related to purchasing, praising, and/or defending the brand. According to McConnell & Huba (2003, as cited in Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013), brand evangelists with their positive WOM will actively disseminate brand-related experiences to other, praising the brand in this ways, and attempt to recruit other consumers to experience the brand, in addition to dissuade others from consuming the rival brands.

Brand managers would be delighted by those last study results as according to Valta (2013, as cited in Fetscherin, Boulanger, Gonçalves Filho, & Quiroga Souki, 2014) they help to justify the budgets expended in product development, pricing strategy, as well as promotional campaigns in an effort to intensify the emotional bond between the brand and the consumers. They are encouraged in their ways by the findings of Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi (2012) showing that brand managers should transition “liked” brands into “loved” brands in order to activate reactions to the brand such as brand loyalty, WOM, and the resistance to negative information. However, they should be careful.

According to Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015) brand love is a dynamic relationship over time, where consumers might fall in and out of love with the brands. As a matter of fact, Dalman, Buche, & Min (2017) have emphasis that once a level of brand love is achieved managers should keep on being proactive: resolving the ethical issues that might appear if possible in a short lapse of time, as well as keeping the “passion alive” using image advertising for instance (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010), but not only. This is since brand love can be divided into different states, as according to Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015) brand love is not an emotion that comes along with only a high level of intensity. They noted that brand love actually could cover the full spectrum of intensity levels, ranging from low up to high. They indicate further that a low level of brand love indicates that the consumer just does not love a brand.

The study from Dalman, Buche, & Min (2017) also emphasised that in the case of extremely unethical situations unless those love relationships flourished into a passionate emotional love, the customers from those brands will not only reject the company but in fact, they will punish it even more than other customers would do. This is being called the “boomerang effect” of reputation according to Sohn & Lariscy (2012), which is following the expectancy violation theory. Still according to Sohn & Lariscy (2012), this theory predicts that negative information impacting an organisation with good CSR repute will be punished even more harshly for its violation of stakeholders' high-level expectancies, compared to firms with a neutral or unfavourable CSR reputation arousing only lower level expectancies for stakeholders. This is in contradiction with the researches of Shim & Yang (2016) who asserted that a company's accumulated efforts in CSR helped to protect a company's reputation even during a crisis.

The corporate social responsibility

Robin & Reidenbach (1987) have defined CSR as "the social contract between business and society in which it operates" (p. 45). According to Shim & Yang (2016) companies endeavour to establish relationships with their stakeholders by investing in actions focused on social and/or environmental concerns. CSR is part of the different associations forming a company's reputation (Brown & Dacin, 1997). It has been comprised under the third main concept, categorising the corporate associations, named the "corporate social expectations" (Berens & Van Riel, 2004).

Still according to Brown & Dacin (1997) managers might choose to position the company alternatively on its CA or its CSR. Such a strategy serves to build or reinforce associations related to the company's products and services that consumers might learn from prior experiences, word-of-mouth communication, or media reports where positive and negative information might be found (Brown & Dacin, 1997).

According to the study of Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz, & Alvarado-Herrera (2009), a socially responsible company is seen by individuals as having a higher prestige. Additionally, CSR is an attribute which differentiates a brand from other competitors, making it unique, and increasing its brand equity (Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz, & Alvarado-Herrera, 2009) accordingly. As a result, individuals could use those attributes for their self-concept, being in this way positively distinguished (Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz, & Alvarado-Herrera, 2009). This means consumer might be more identified with a brand after it has shared and showed CSR behaviours than without it. This is coherent with Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) as, according to their study, consumers are likely to be attracted to a company identity that helps them to satisfy at least one of their three basic self-definitional needs. Those self-definitional needs are the following: the self-continuity which is about how similar it is to consumers' own identity; self-distinctiveness which is about the distinctiveness in traits consumers value; and self-enhancement which might be enhanced by a brand's prestige (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins (2006) found equally that CSR can serve as a viable concept to enhance consumer identification, though only if the target customers of the firm value social responsibility, which is coherent with previous results.

According to McGuire, Sundgren, & Schneeweis (1988), a lack of social responsibility from the side of a company may expose it to significant additional risk from lawsuits, and fines and shall limit, as a result, its strategic options while a crisis might emerge.

However, to communicate about its CSR might not always be well perceived, as in the study of Kim, Kim, & Cameron, (2009) the results showed that CSR messages, often based on an organisation's relationship with a community, are not necessarily perceived in a favourable manner in a crisis situation. This has been then confirmed by Shim & Yang (2016) where their study's findings further warned that crisis-related CSR might even tend to backfire by increasing the perception of hypocrisy from consumer's point of view. According to Vanhamme & Grobben (2008) supported this idea with their results, showing that companies facing a crisis should be careful when using CSR as a tool to defend their reputations. According to their study, a company with a long history of involvement in CSR might mention their good deeds about CSR while dealing with an unethical crisis, without raising the suspicion of the consumers (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2008). While a company with short-term CSR involvement will trigger scepticism using its brief CSR history, which will lead to a negative perception of the company, its products, and its integrity (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2008).

Still according to Vanhamme & Grobben (2008), a company with a long CSR history will be able to dismiss a crisis as a one-time incident. As CSR might encourage consumers to identify with the brand, we could suppose that a highly identified consumer, or a passionate consumer, might then forgive the one-time misbehaviour of the brand in this way, though depending on the seriousness of the case, which brings us back to the previous reasonings here above.

Customer value and the hedonic and utilitarian goods

Woodruff (1997) defines customer value as "a customer's perceived preference for and evaluation of those product attributes, attribute performances, and consequences arising from use that facilitates (or blocks) achieving the customer's goals and purposes in use situations" (p. 142). According to Smith & Colgate (2007), there are four significant types of value which can be created by organisations: the functional/instrumental value, the experiential/hedonic value, the symbolic/expressive value, and the cost/sacrifice value.

The functional/instrumental value is characterised by Smith & Colgate (2007) by the extent to which a product (good or service) has desired characteristics, is useful or performs the desired function. This value is related to utilitarian goods, defined by the IGI global as "products that are acquired and used mainly for its specific functions or final usage outcome, characterised by its practical aspects".

The experiential/hedonic value is characterised, still according to Smith & Colgate (2007), by the extent to which a product creates appropriate experiences, feelings, and emotions for the customer. This value is related to hedonic goods, defined by IGI global as "products associated with experimentation, enthusiasm, satisfaction and pleasure, typically leading to emotional gratification". In this way, a hedonic object, known as usually being aesthetic, creating fun, play, excitement, or other positive affective states as pleasure or enjoyment for the consumer, provides a firm emotional grounding which may be used as a base for a strong product relationship (Smith and Colgate, 2007).

According to Sirgy et al. (1997) products, and services are assumed to have personal images, just as people do. When it is about a product, ret, the personal image attributes associated with it are distinguished from functional or utilitarian attributes (Sirgy et al., 1997).

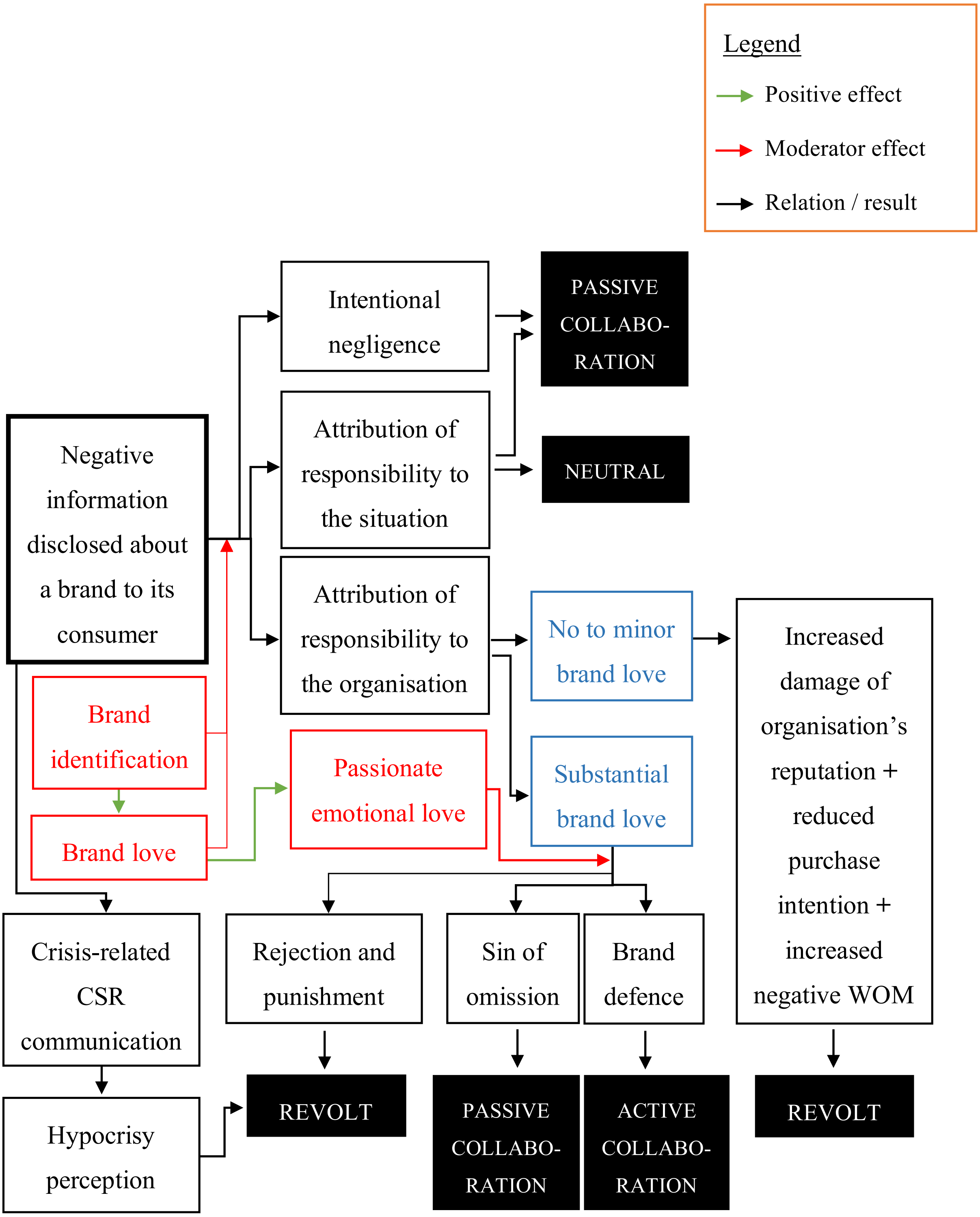
Finally, according to Smith & Colgate (2007) the symbolic/expressive value is characterised by the extent to which customers attach or associate psychological meaning to a product, while the cost/sacrifice value is concerned about the transaction costs. To try to maximise, or at least realise value benefits, consumers and customers also try to minimise the costs and other sacrifices that may be involved in the purchase, ownership, and use of a product (Smith & Colgate, 2007).

Hwang and Kandampully (2012) found in their study that luxury fashion brands are embodying hedonic aspects, related so to the symbolic/expressive value and the experiential/hedonic value, can build enough self-connections with its customers, sufficient enough to build an emotional relationship. This is supported by (Smith and Colgate, 2007) who wrote that luxury goods appeal to consumer's self-concepts and self-worth, making the consumer feel good about himself, either in possessing or in giving, the product. Those relationships can become then love relationship, as seen previously. For Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) satisfied consumers' love is greater for brands in hedonic product categories than utilitarian, and for brands that present more symbolic assets. This is because, according to Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015), hedonic products have been investigated to be holding more symbolic benefits, which makes it easy for a consumer to use them as a convenient mean for the expression of his self, as well as his social self. Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015) concluded according to their investigations that the tendency of hedonic brands to promote affective responses, such as brand love, does not weaken over time but rather remains constant. Those results, according to those authors, confirm that hedonic elements such as fun and enjoyment remain essential in a consumer's perception over the entire course of a brand relationship.

Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015) found equally in their study that brands providing fun and enjoyment are indeed socially attractive, but solely in the early stages of the consumer-brand relationship. According to them, with time the passionate relationship between the consumer and the brand usually evolves, as somewhat utilitarian aspects take over the perceived hedonic aspects of the brand. Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015) attribute this result to the fact that functional benefits, such as the ability to perform the desired function, are central for long-term relationships. As a consequence, the functional, utilitarian aspects of a product or a good should not be omitted as once attributed to a brand's products it will also strengthen the identity tie between the consumer inner self and the brand, as brands providing utilitarian value can indeed be used for identity construction (Huber, Meyer, & Schmid, 2015). It will possibly result then in a passionate response towards the particular brand, in the same way as the hedonic characteristic.

As a result, according to Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015), it is recommended to marketers to promote the hedonic aspect of their product prominently at the launch stage, while, in later stages of the product life cycle, they should additionally focus on rather the functional aspects. This reasoning is coherent with the results from Elliott & Yannopoulou (2007) as once there are purchase decisions involving a high level of risk perceived by consumers, functional brands have been found to be a safe choice as they bring confidence which allows consumers to rely on them. It would be realistic to assume that those perceived risks might appear during the length of the customer-brand relationship, or during certain markets evolutions. Confidence has been defined by Elliott & Yannopoulou (2007) as "a mix of cognitive and emotional perceptions, largely based on experience", with the emotional judgment, so the affective, being prominent in a high level of perceived risk associated with buying and consuming a product (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007).

Process according to the theory



METHOD

We will first start with a case study, then by a practical framework linked to the brands from those case studies. The purpose of those case analyses will be to test the theory on some three recent cases of fraud and unethical practice(s). We will analyse them in a way to know what is behind the crises of the brands and have an overall point of view of the evolution of the sales of the chosen brands. We have then implemented a qualitative study with one of the cases in a way to have some reactions which will be useful in the next step which will be a quantitative study. The quantitative study will be from a sample of consumers from the different brands to test different moderators as brand love which has been enlightened in the theoretical framework.

CASE STUDY: brand crisis cases and their consequences

According to Fombrun & Shanley (1990), individuals construct their perceived reputation of companies from available information about firms' activities, originating from the firms themselves, from the media, or from other monitors. Still according to Fombrun & Shanley (1990), persons use and propagate information they consider important for assessing firms' successes and failures at acquiring resource inputs, improving throughputs, and sustaining their outputs.

With the online social media era, people can share their product opinion and experience at an unprecedented pace and scale (Liu, Chen, Lusch, Chen, Zimbra, & Zeng, 2010), that information is then spread in the whole world very quickly and in an uncontrolled way for marketing managers. According to Winer (2009), with the "old" media as TV advertising, print, radio, the marketing manager controls the message which is one-way and the media. While the "New" media, like blogs and social networking sites, do not permit that level of control both regarding the message being delivered about the brand and what is being said in online conversations (Winer, 2009). This is confirmed by Kimmel & Kitchen (2013) as, according to them, managers have recognized that their customers and prospects are more powerful and sceptical than ever before, with consumer-to-consumer influence about purchasing and related behaviours taking over the previously shaped business-to-consumer marketing tools of advertising, public relations, promotion, direct mail, and personal selling. We could think about the new tools arising from the Internet, linked to the convenient different accesses via mobile phones and tablets due to the technological development, making people as consumers more connected than ever between them, resulting in a "power in numbers" (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2013, p. 5). As a result, there is an increase in the proportion of customers who search for and provide brand-related information, due to the ease with which consumers can now give their comments online (e.g. websites, forums, discussion boards, etc.) and on social networking sites (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013).

According to this, an increasing concern among contemporary organizations emerged about how brand-directed behaviours by consumers could negatively influence other consumers, sales (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006), and, eventually, stock price (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2008) or firm's value (Zhu & Zhang, 2010; Chen, Liu, & Zhang, 2012). This is because the crises of brands are particularly an opportunity for people to give their point of view, and to share it with their friends, often entertainingly and sarcastically on social media platforms. As a result, it is essential to take some recent cases of brand crises because people are affected by the opinion of others and what they could see or share on the social media platforms which are accessible and massively used around the globe.

Different crises have been studied as a way to analyse the most relevant ones according to our subject of research. We have only taken brands affected by fraud or unethical practices which had not changed their brand name either their logo until now. The evolution of consumption from the consumer will be more relevant to analyse in this way, as we will still be talking about the same brand and expect in this way some associations from the consumers' side.

The crisis case for Domino's pizza in 2009 about food tampering has not been analysed as the unethical practices had been settled on a very low scale, and the case was isolated, as only two employees from a franchise store had practised the unethical actions. The tampered food also had never been served (Gregory, 2009). Though, the prank video had been spread rapidly over the internet which affected the brand image, obliging the brand to launch their Twitter and Facebook account right in that time in a way to reassure the consumer who had complained on the platform (Jacques, 2009). They also launched in the meantime a video on YouTube with the CEO as the spokesperson (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012). The vice-president of communication of Domino's pizza is mentioning this change from 2008 to 2009, explaining that when, until 2008, you could handle a crisis situation from your side and show the result to the consumer, since 2009, for a crisis or an issue being spread on the social media realm you need to be responding and showing and explaining everything you are doing to the audience interested at any moment (Jacques, 2009).

This is mostly about speed linked to accuracy as a game changer, and as Coombs (2015, as cited in Coombs 2014) is equally saying, the advent of social media increased this pressure of quick responses from a company about a crisis. This is confirmed by Kimmel & Kitchen (2013) who wrote that online social networking channels are providing an increasingly attractive means for consumers for the rapid and widespread dissemination of WOM online, being then called electronic WOM (eWOM). This encourages our assumption that crises are being spread faster because of the social media platforms and that the new crises cases are different for brands since around 2009 in comparison to before the massive use of those platforms.

We should note that, still according to Kimmel & Kitchen (2013), because of the nature of interpersonal contacts among intimates such as friends and family members (so-called close ties) involved in offline WOM episodes, such communications tend to be impregnated with higher levels of trust and credibility than eWOM. However, those last authors balanced this last claim with the fact that in addition to its greater reach, eWOM is characterised by greater specialisation, as there is likely to be an apparent expert about virtually anything online, as opposed to one's close circle of intimates. This could bring evidence that trust levels can anyway be also high for messages emanating from unknown consumers engaged in eWOM (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2013). Therefore, besides of being spread faster with the social media platforms and other tools, crises cases could also profoundly affect consumers' attitude once in contact with those eWOM, as trusted messages being spread should create more impact than untrusted messages. Besides, the author Kamtarin (2012) proved a model where eWOM and trust affected behavioural intentions from customers' part.

As a result, we will then be interested from cases from 2009 on, and, if possible, as close to the present as possible, as the number of social media users as continuously increased since 2010 from 1 billion that year until 2,5 billion users in 2017 (see Appendix 3).

In addition to this, we will look for corporate brands from business-to-consumer companies as we could see that those types of companies were potentially enhancing more consumer identification than business-to-business companies, as well as more associations. We will focus on brands having product categories serving both hedonic and utilitarian concepts, as both have been seen to develop emotional bonds in short and long-term brand relationships. Note that we will investigate brands having firstly extended symbolic benefits, so hedonic attributes, in comparison to their utilitarian attributes in a way to expect a sufficient amount of customers with brand love. We will focus on cases from brands from different sectors, with different sales sizes, different brand equity levels, and also with cases of different intensity which might affect the consumers in different ways.

Grid analysis of the cases

	Findus*	**Volkswagen Passenger Cars**	**Apple**
Logo			
Foundation	1903 in Sweden, production of frozen food products since 1945 (Nomad Foods Europe Ltd., 2017)	1937 in Germany	1977 in California (United States of America)
Brand type	Corporate brand until the end of 2015, then belonging to Nomad Foods Ltd.	Corporate brand from the VW AG. Group.	Corporate brand linked to different product brands.
Market geography / type	Europe / Frozen food	Worldwide / Car	Worldwide / Electronic devices, software
Annual sales revenues (Turnover): year of crisis and after (in billion €)	0.665 (2013: year of crisis disclosed), 0.634 (2014), 0.635 (2015).	106.24 (2015: year of crisis disclosed), 105.651 (2016), 79.979 (+26,329 ≅106,308 estimated without reorganisation) (2017)	126.610 (2012), 140.870 (2013: year of first crisis disclosed), 143.310 (2014), 218.990 (2015), 202.7 (2016), 211.58 (2017: year of second crisis analysed disclosed).
Brand equity	Medium	Medium-Strong	Strong
Crisis practices	Fraud & Unethical practice(s) from supplier(s)	Fraud & Unethical practice(s)	Unethical practice(s) from supplier(s)
Crisis type	CA	CSR & CA	CSR

* Not taking into account Findus Italy, which is the brand name Iglo is using for the Italian market with a different logo.

The Findus case study

The facts

> On January 15, 2013, it was reported that the Food Safety Authority (FSA) of Ireland had identified horse and pig DNA in frozen beef burgers sold in Irish and British supermarkets and fast food restaurants. On January 16, the food scandal became top news in the U.K. media. Three food suppliers were found to be the origin of the horse and pig meat. The food retailers Tesco, Aldi, Lidl, Iceland and Dunnes Stores withdrew their products. (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015)

After some additional tests, Findus lasagnas in the United Kingdom has been analysed to contain almost 100 per cent horsemeat, and tests performed in Sweden by Findus, required by the FSA, gave the same results (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015). Burger King Ireland also got involved, further analysis showed they had served horsemeat burgers. Not surprisingly, the unwanted horsemeat (and to a minor extent pig meat) was also found in products from other Swedish food retailers and producers such as Axfood, ICA, IKEA, Dafgårds and Coop. In total it involved over 60 food producers in 16 countries. According to Findus' CEO, it is a Findus quality test which brought light on the scandal (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015).

The result and actions from the brand

According to Falkheimer & Heide (2015), in the Swedish media and public debate, it is Findus (with its lasagnas) and Dafgårds/IKEA (with its meatballs) that received the most attention. Finally, the Swedish Food National Agency finally explained that the story was complicated and that Findus Group was not responsible for what happened. Also, no drugs had been found inside the horsemeat, so the products were not dangerous for the consumption (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015). Though, the brand value and trust for Findus decreased on an essential manner after the divulgation of the scandal. To counteract this effect, a trust recovery campaign was launched rapidly by Findus, letting, for instance, Swedish persons to freely visit the facilities of Findus Sweden (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015).

The results of this recovery campaign showed that Findus in Sweden got then actually a higher preference and value than before the crisis. (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015)

Sales analysis

According to Reuters (2013) and the Fitch noting agency, the horsemeat issue that emerged in early 2013 directly affected only 0.9% of Findus product sales, which appeared then to have had a minimal impact on the Findus brand and the group's overall financial performance. The sales of Findus increased in 2013 in comparison to the previous year, despite the significant withdrawal of their lasagnas from the shelves that year (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015). Though, the revenue of the Findus group saw its revenues (consolidated) down from £558.8million in the year 2013, to £519.6million in the year 2014, to £471.4million in the year 2015 (PWC, 2015) (see appendix 4 for sales in Euros).

The parent company Findus Sverige AB touched, got bought in 2015 by Nomad Foods for the amount of approximately £500million (Nomad Foods, 2016).

The VW case study

The facts

In September 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that many VW cars being sold in America had a "defeat device" - or software - in diesel engines that could detect when they were being tested, changing the performance accordingly to improve results (Hotten, 2015). Volkswagen admitted the facts in an agreed "statement of facts" published last year as part of a settlement with the US Department of Justice (Leggett, 2018). Still according to Leggett (2018), this document lighted out how Volkswagen engineers struggled to make a diesel engine which would both perform well and be capable of meeting the rigorous US emissions standards. Instead, the VW engineers designed a system based on a software to switch on emissions controls when the cars were being tested and turn them off during normal driving (Leggett, 2018). According to Oldenkamp, Van Zelm, & Huijbregts (2016), VW would have installed the software on 11 million diesel engines since 2009. In total, the figures are currently of 8.5 million fraudulent passenger cars sold by VW in European countries, and 0.6 million in the USA (482 thousand 2.0-L engine vehicles, and 85 thousand 3.0-L engine vehicles).

The result and actions from the brand

"The scandal has cost the company around $29bn (£22bn) - but any damage to its reputation doesn't seem to have lasted very long. Last year it sold 10.7 million cars around the world - a new record." (Leggett, 2018). This is what it can be read on the BBC website, though looking at the VW annual report 2017, it is not 10.7 million cars which have been sold but 10.7 million vehicles from the different brands of VW, with a range comprising cars models but also trucks. The sales of VW branded passenger cars have diminished from 4,347 thousand in 2016 to 3,573 thousand in 2017 (Volkswagen AG, 2018). The claim that its reputation has not been tarnished might then no further be adequate.

Emission of NOx particles

According to the International Council of Clean Transportation (ICCT, 2017), the emissions of NOx particles are 5.5 times for a diesel engine than a gasoline engine until the end of the year 2017 (see Appendix 5). For the case of VW, the engines are set to release 0.9 g of nitrogen oxides (NOx) per kilometre driven, which is approximately 5 to 11 times the amount legally permitted in the European Union, and 21 times the amount legally permitted in the USA (Oldenkamp, Van Zelm, & Huijbregts, 2016). According to the researches of Oldenkamp, Van Zelm, & Huijbregts (2016) NOx particles are extremely severe for the health, as after inhalation, these fine particles may cause or worsen respiratory diseases, such as bronchitis and lung cancer, and have been investigated to aggravate also existing heart disease, leading on a general matter to increased hospital admissions and premature death (Oldenkamp, Van Zelm, & Huijbregts, 2016, p. 121).

The software was diminishing the emissions during the tests, which means in real time the emissions of nitrous oxide (NOx) were much higher. However, as we can see on the data of the ICCT (2016) for Europe, on average the engine diesel from all car brands were releasing 5.7 times more particles than permitted between 2009-2015, and 5.5 times more particles than permitted between 2014-2017. So VW was not the only brand selling engines with a higher rejection of particles than the allowance.

Sales analysis

The sales of the VW group increased from 213.292 million euros in 2015 to 217,267 million euros in 2016 to 230.682 million euros in 2017 (see Appendix 6). VW was at the source of the scandal as it is the parent company of the other brands Audi, Seat, Skoda and Porsche which also had some models with the software inside (The Telegraph, 2018).

Looking at the annual revenues per brand from the VW group, according to the Volkswagen AG. (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018) annual reports, only the revenue of VW Passenger Cars can be seen as having significantly changed in the year 2017, with 25 billion euros less from 2016 to 2017. For the other years, and the other brands of the VW group than the VW Passenger Cars brand itself, the revenues have increased except for the luxury brands of Porsche and Bentley which have seen their revenues slightly diminishing (see Appendix 7). If we look at the number of cars sold worldwide, in 2017 the number of cars sold had increased by 1.77

billion in comparison to the previous year (Statista, 2018) which means it is not a diminishing of the sales of cars worldwide which is at the cause of the shrink. In the Volkswagen AG. (2018, p. 24) annual report, VW is giving as an explanation that a reclassification of companies is at the source of this important drop. Still, in the annual report, it can be read that a part of the model sales from VW Passenger Cars only has been transferred to another line under the name "other" in a way to increase transparency and comparability between the different brands. In fact, some importers are also distributing other brands from the group, and some intergroup items need to be deducted due to cross-brand logistics and services. On the other hand, looking at the sales of models per year for the brand VW Passenger Cars (see Appendix 8), the sales of models constantly decrease until this change in reorganisation for 2017. In the Volkswagen AG. (2017) annual report for the year 2016 if we look at the usual number which was inside the "other" line before this change in reorganisation this number was of -1,638 thousand vehicle sales for 2016 and -1,608 thousand for 2015. As this number is of -840 thousand in the Volkswagen AG. (2018a) annual report for the year 2017, we can estimate 798 thousand vehicles which have been removed from the number of vehicle sales for the brand VW Passenger Cars. Those 798 thousand have been added on the graph in Appendix 8 to the numbers of vehicles sales for the year 2017 in a way to compare with the same way of calculating the approximate vehicle sales VW Passenger Cars brand would have had if there had not been the reorganisation.

From the report of the ICCT (2017) of the sales amount for the countries having the most significant sales of cars in Europe (see Appendix 9 and 10), it can be seen a decrease of sales of diesel models in the last few years. According to Tietge (2017, as cited in ICCT, 2017), this decrease in diesel car sales is likely due to a loss in trust from consumers who are increasingly worried and concerned about the threat of diesel bans in urban areas. For the author, Italy is going in the wrong direction. In fact, they are the only major European passenger car market which has not seen a decline in diesel shares since 2015; their sales of electric vehicles are minuscule; while the Italian carmakers are ranked third in Europe in term of car production, led by FCA group which struggles to reduce its carbon dioxide (CO2) and nitrogen oxide (NOx) emission, trailing in 2016 behind other manufacturer groups (Tietge, 2017). While some carmakers still claim that diesel cars are needed to comply with CO2 standards, which was the reason why many states supported diesel engines, a recent study by Díaz et al. (2017) shows that hybrid electric vehicles offer a more cost-effective option for CO2 mitigation. This would be the reason why suddenly states in Europe are going against the diesel engines, planning to ban them drastically from their city centres.

Recognition of their wrong about CSR

> When it comes to the emissions issue, we have failed to live up to our own standards in several areas. The irregularities in the handling of emissions tests contradict everything we stand for. We will do everything in our power to prevent incidents of this kind from recurring, and are fully committed to re-embracing our standards and winning back public trust. (Volkswagen AG. (2018b)

As it had been seen with the theory, this might be a crucial turning point for the brand to avoid further backfire from their customers, not trying to use the past developed CSR reputation to deal with the crisis admitting their responsibility directly and their wrong.

The Apple case study

The facts

A child labour crisis emerged at the beginning of the year 2013 about some cases of child labour in 2012.

> The California-based company, which has stepped up its auditing efforts in the past year under chief executive Tim Cook, said it had uncovered 106 “active cases” of children being employed by its suppliers over the course of 2012, and 70 people who had been underage and either left or passed the age of 16 by the time of its audit. None of those individuals is still employed by the suppliers, after Apple worked with its partners to help them spot fake identification documents or falsified records. In one extreme case, 74 of those 106 under-16s were employed by a single Chinese manufacturer of circuit-board components used in Apple products. A large local labour agency “knowingly” supplied the children, Apple said. Apple terminated its relationship with the supplier and reported the labour agency to the local authorities, who fined it and suspended its licence. (Bradshaw, 2013)

According to Garside (2013), Apple investigators found that the local agency conspired with families to counterfeit the identification documents of the children.

A second unethical crisis about the production of the iPhone X emerged in 2017.

> Apple’s main supplier in Asia has been employing students illegally working overtime to assemble the iPhone X, as it struggles to catch up with demand after production

> delays. Six high school students told the Financial Times they routinely work 11-hour days assembling the iPhone X at a factory in Zhengzhou, China, which constitutes illegal overtime for student interns under Chinese law. The six said they were among a group of 3,000 students from sent in September to work at the local facility run by Taiwan-based Apple supplier Hon Hai Precision Industry, better known as Foxconn. The students, aged 17 to 19, said they were told that a three-month stint at the factory was required "work experience" that they had to complete in order to graduate. "We are being forced by our school to work here," said Ms Yang, an 18-year-old student training to be a train attendant who declined to use her first name for fear of punishment. "The work has nothing to do with our studies." She said she assembled up to 1,200 iPhone X cameras a day. Apple said an audit has turned up "instances of student interns working overtime at a supplier facility in China", adding "we've confirmed the students worked voluntarily, were compensated and provided benefits, but they should not have been allowed to work overtime". (Yang, 2017)

The sales analysis

As for Findus having activities in different currencies, the method of conversion using the average annual rate has been used to translate the annual sales of Apple from dollar to euro into euros, using the Internal Revenue Service rate (IRS, 2018). The global annual Turnover of Apple (Apple Inc., 2016, 2017, 2018) (see in Appendix 11) evolved from 126.610 billion euros in 2012, to 140.870 billion euros in 2013, 143.310 billion in 2014, 218.990 billion euros in 2015, 202.700 billion euros in 2016, and 211,580 billion euros in 2017.

Differences between the three scandals

According to Moyer, DeVries, Spink (2017) Findus brand was the victim of the fraud from the food producer who made some benefits which were proportionally less critical than the loss of reputation, recall costs and loss of sales for the brand. The attribution of the crisis responsibility is so of the type "victim crises" and "product tampering/malevolence" (Coombs and Holladay, 2002, as cited in Coombs, 2014) where the crisis responsibility is minimal and external agent caused damage to the organisation. The crisis type, according to Jeon & Baeck (2016), would be then of CA only as the brand would not have been able to produce the expected output quality, and not being a CSR crisis as the situation appears too complex for the management to know what was happening about the meat they were buying, as so many intermediaries were involved.

While VW was at the source of the scandal as the brand accepted to have its engineers putting the software inside its models. According to Leggett (2018), the former VW CEO Martin Winterkorn had been fully briefed about what his engineers were up to and had authorised a continuing cover-up. The attribution of crisis responsibility is so of the type “preventable crises” and “organizational misdeed” (Coombs and Holladay, 2002, as cited in Coombs, 2014) where there is a strong crisis responsibility defined as “management actions that put stakeholders at risk and/or violate the law” (Coombs, 2014). The type of the crisis, Jeon & Baeck (2016), would be of CA and CSR.

The Apple crisis about the abusing use of adolescents is, according to the crisis responsibility, of the type “preventable crises” and “product tampering/malevolence” linked to an “organisational misdeed” (Coombs and Holladay, 2002, as cited in Coombs, 2014). This is as the supplier was looking for more workers in a way to comply with the production schedules, avoiding idle capacity as the production of iPhones are seasonal with an increase of production every year between August and December (Yang, 2017). Apple is known to diminish its inventories to counterface depreciation and storage costs (Lu, 2014), which affects the suppliers as they are not producing with the same intensity throughout the year. Also, they appeared to know that the adolescents were working in the supply chain. This case would be seen as a CSR crisis type according to Jeon & Baeck (2016).

The child labour case is, according to the crisis responsibility, of the type “victim crises” and “product tampering/malevolence” (Coombs and Holladay, 2002, as cited in Coombs, 2014) as Apple has managerial actions to avoid using child labour inside its supply chain, which is against the law in China as the legal working age is 16 in the jurisdiction (Garside, 2013). We suppose that the suppliers acted malevolently using children, as Apple said about it: “Our approach to underage labour is clear: We don’t tolerate it, and we’re working to eradicate it from our industry.” (Apple Inc., 2013, p. 17).

To investigate

For the VW scandals, it appears that it is more the governmental actions which are encouraging the consumers to change their habits. There is, for now, the transition to electric cars. An exploratory interview (see syntheses in appendix 12) showed us that the consumer who had bought a diesel model with a software inside would keep on buying VW as the next one will be electric.

With the Findus scandal example, it seems that once the company has been the victim of fraud, it can recuperate its customers once sharing transparency (see recovery paradox). This is why in Sweden the brand value even increased, but only Swedish persons have been visiting the facilities, or some journalists from other countries, which means that even if the brand value increased in Sweden, it seems it did not in the rest of the world as the sales plummeted since then. So there is well an apparent overall revolt from the customers towards the brand in this case as if they reject the brand, which means they should have less PI. However, we should stay careful as other factors could have made the sales falling, and we did not study the evolution of the frozen market.

No apparent effect on the sales of Apple, as they are nearby stagnant for the year after the child labour crisis has been disclosed, but then rocketing the following year. While if we compare with the two other brands, they had not their turnover evolving as such the second year after the crisis disclosed.

A hypothesis would be then that the consumer is changing his habits when the cheating has affected himself: to eat horse meat even though he thought he was eating beef, which might feel personal as it is affecting our self. Horse meat could be linked to less quality or bad for the health. The cheating of the VW cars is not for now affecting the consumer as no further legal issue are made from the states on the consumer itself who had seen his car having the software. As the cars are more polluting than supposedly, this crisis is seen as affecting mostly the persons around which might breathe the toxic particles. So a possible social pressure could appear towards the consumers, but still, the crisis does not affect himself personally. The case of Apple is even going more in this way, as the unethical practices are not affecting the consumers either the persons around, only Chinese workers from a country which is far from Europe.

About the personal impact perceived by the consumers of Volkswagen, we should balance it with the fact that the values of those diesel cars are for now diminishing due to the scandal and the states' actions, which might then affect the consumer if he wants to sell his car.

PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK

Qualitative study: focus group

A qualitative study has been set in place to verify already partly the theory and have some primary source reactions of individuals about a crisis of a brand they are consuming or have consumed. Furthermore, it will help us to test already some vocabulary about the brand relationships and brand crises.

Sample

The sample has been on four persons, three men and one woman aged between 25 and 55 years old. It has been chosen in order to obtain a variety of perceptions. All have been using Apple products, for more than a year, and some are still using them actively in their everyday life. They all had or have an iPhone product.

Name	**Age**	**Profession**	**Apple product(s) used currently**	**Time of consumption of Apple product(s)**
Quentin	25	Developer	None (iPhone used in the past)	2 years
Florian	27	Sales analyst	None (iPhone used in the past)	4 years
Fabienne	54	Milliner	iPhone, iPad, Mac	8 years
François	55	IBM software seller	iPhone X, latest MacBook Pro	10 years

Interview guide and transcription

(see Appendix 13 and 14)

Degree of relationship with the brand

There were in the sample, according to the transcription different degrees of relationship with the brand: from inexistent or low, to identified, then passionate.

Fabienne said that the products were "pretty beautiful", continuing further comparing them to other computer brands saying "The look is beautiful, when you see a PC, you see that ... it's sexy". She was feeling identified with the brand linked to her profession, as she said "I would say that this is a brand that is quite innovative and among other things that is very important for all creative professions. So, for example, you'll always see graphic designers, people who work around fashion in general who have Apple computers". She said then that she was identified with the brand also as there is a "certain dynamic" in Apple's products, and that "there is a social status which stands out", as "you hit a certain elite in spite of everything, there is a recognition on this point of view. If you have an iPhone logically it shows that you have 'succeeded'". Also, she liked the entrepreneur spirit of the brand, another identification for her as a self-congruence as she said: “I think that the story of Steve Job appeals to me too. Because he's a guy who started in his garage, then after he sold his shares, then he repurchased the company. So I find the entrepreneur side appealing to me.” before adding that “all this marketing means to me (emotionally)”. According to her, the emotional part of Apple was in the attractiveness and presentation of the products, which was nice to her. We can say this consumer is attached to the brand, with a strong emotional bond, but it seems hard to say she is passionate about the brand, as a passion is going beyond brand attachment. The social self-congruence was not present according to her, as she said she was not using the products to show her personality or identity socially, adding “when you have certain social standing you don't care about that”. As a result, we can assert the presence of an ASI for this consumer with the brand.

For Florian, people were like 'sheep' having Apple products. He said Apple products were less and less expressing a status and said that they are now a “lot less exclusive. Now everyone has smartphones. So it's democratized. Even though prices have not gone down, people ... are paying more.”. He added though that Apple’s design was emotional. There is no apparent emotional relationship between this individual and the brand, so we would assert that he is not identified with the brand.

François said he was strongly familiar with the Apple products as he said: “I sleep next to my smartphone so yes I'm pretty familiar”. The attributes of the brands are for him “design, innovation, …”. He appeared identified with the brand as he said there was “a certain chic” in Apple’s products, which was like having a nice car as the products were “luxury goods”. He said, “It is pleasant to have a beautiful product in hand”. The self-congruence is present, which appears to be ISSI, and possibly an ASSI. He added that he was passionate with the technological innovation of the brand, though he did not share or express other stronger emotional bond with the brand, so he appeared not to be passionately in love with the brand. We can assert this consumer is identified with the brand, and passionate.

Quentin said, “They stagnate a little for now from about innovation”. He recognised that the brand was focused more than others on the sensual and experience side of the products, but not on bringing innovations or things which are not seen elsewhere. Again, there is no apparent emotional relationship between this person and the brand, so we would assert that he is not identified with the brand.

Corporate social responsibility perception

Quentin started talking (before having disclosed the first case to them) about the unethical practices about the production of the Apple products, based on a case of child labour. Fabienne said then that Apple should do more about re-using old iPhones or giving them to charity as the components were highly polluting the planet once not re-used saying about it: “it's madness”. Counter-argued by the passionate consumer who said: “Yes you can recycle ...”. The two not identified ex-consumers of the brand (Quentin and Florian), said then that the brand was not ethical from their point of view. The passionate consumer (François) brought then as a defence the recent CSR actions Apple had made, like solar panels and their new Apple centre totally green. After this, Quentin talked about the crisis case which emerged after Apple finally recognised to slow down his old products when users would install some updates saying “those are things which are made for a scheduled and rather important obsolescence. Where after two years they are going to slow down your iPhone for is telling to protect the battery, but in the finale, you are going to go to buy another one”. The passionate consumer brought back the conversation on a less unethical case about the different connectors or type of cable the Apple products were having, neglecting to talk about the other negative points given before. Though at the end Florian brought the tax evasion case, which was agreed shortly by François saying “It’s true, yes”, before saying that “it is not a fraud”. Quentin argued, as an answer, that it had been considered as illegal by the European Union.

Unethical practices disclosed: reactions

The identified consumer (Fabienne) said about the adolescent case that “It is difficult to know who tells the truth, if they are really exploited, or if it is just …”. The passionate consumer tried firstly to avoid talking about the first unethical case, opposing himself by saying that we were going around in circles with those kinds of case, confirmed by Fabienne, then defending the brand directly in front of the others saying “I think that these companies today make quite a lot of efforts, then it is not for that that there are no problems”. He added that it was just three months of intensive labour for the students “which were not either ten-year-old children» and also “that has to do good” to them to work like this. Followed by Fabienne who said that it was not that bad, and that “they (Apple) would not do stupid things like that with all the money that they earn”. Counter-argued by Florian who said “that is not it really an argument which counts, I believe. The more you earn, the more foolery you do”.

We need to note that according to the interview guide and the fact that the interview was not individual but in group, it was natural to have the identified consumers defending the brand maybe more than what they would have done during an individual interview. In an individual interview, the passionate one might just have omitted to talk about the case like he intended to do in the beginning, following the theory.

About the child labour case, another interesting quotation than the ones already said for the adolescent cases confirmed what we hypothesised about the fact that the Apple case might potentially not affect the consumers or their environment. Fabienne said: “these Asians you do not really see their age ...” giving a possible excuse for Apple in this way and showing a gap between this case and herself. Expressing how these Asians are foreign to us so that we cannot tell their age.

François noted the difference between the two unethical cases presented, saying the first one using intensively adolescents was less unethical than the second one using child labour. This person, who consumed the most Apple products in the group, was saying that the case of child labour was pretty old already, defending the brand in this way keeping on with the argument that those companies improved a lot nowadays. The ex-consumer (Florian) having used longer an iPhone agreed also on the fact that the case from 2012 was old, followed by the other ex-consumer (Quentin).

The group has finally agreed on the current improvement of brands in general about becoming more ethical, as there is today a more significant awareness of social and environmental issues.

Crisis responsibility

The ex-consumer which used the Apple product the less time was the most negative saying for the case (intensive labour for adolescents) that “They have a responsibility inside as there should be a moment when something had to make that we needed more children to work. Whether it is a pressure of production or a lack of supervision.”. And for the second case (child labour) he said: “it's still the responsibility of the company to ensure that the workers comply …” after other ex-consumer defended saying that “it can even happen in Belgium” as the parents had falsified the identification documents of the children with the help of the work agency. The identified consumer (Fabienne) was saying from her side that the brand was not responsible and appeared to attribute the responsibility on the situation, or other actors than Apple, as she said: “That's what we have said, there are people of the country who falsify, the parents ... so they (Apple) are not responsible. It's a bit like we just said, there are deadlines to be met, there are parents who want to have money. And here it is a vicious circle, but ... Apple is not a hundred per cent responsible, for me is not responsible. They are responsible for the pressure maybe, or the timing and that ... it is necessary to succeed in producing.”.

An interesting synthesis given by the members was that neither just the situation or just the organisation was to be blamed for the responsibility. They all agreed finally that the responsibility was on both, even though they also agreed that it was the organisation which encouraged the situation, after having brought more pressure on the suppliers. The theory tells us that in a way to have the responsibility attributed, the negative actions need to be first recognised as intentional. The term was seen as complicated and quite strong for one of the ex-consumers, which was the most critical about Apple brand’s responsibility for both crises. He said about the first case “Intentional, no, I think they would have had other people they would have taken other people, I do not know, but I hope.”, moreover, about the child labour case: “somehow yes it's intentional because if there are more stringent deadlines and there are no other employees then yes. (…) They did not pull them to come and work, and to make so that it arrives like that. There is a responsibility somewhere, yes, but not intentional, it is strong as a word. It depends …”.

Change of habits after the disclosure of unethical practices linked to the brand

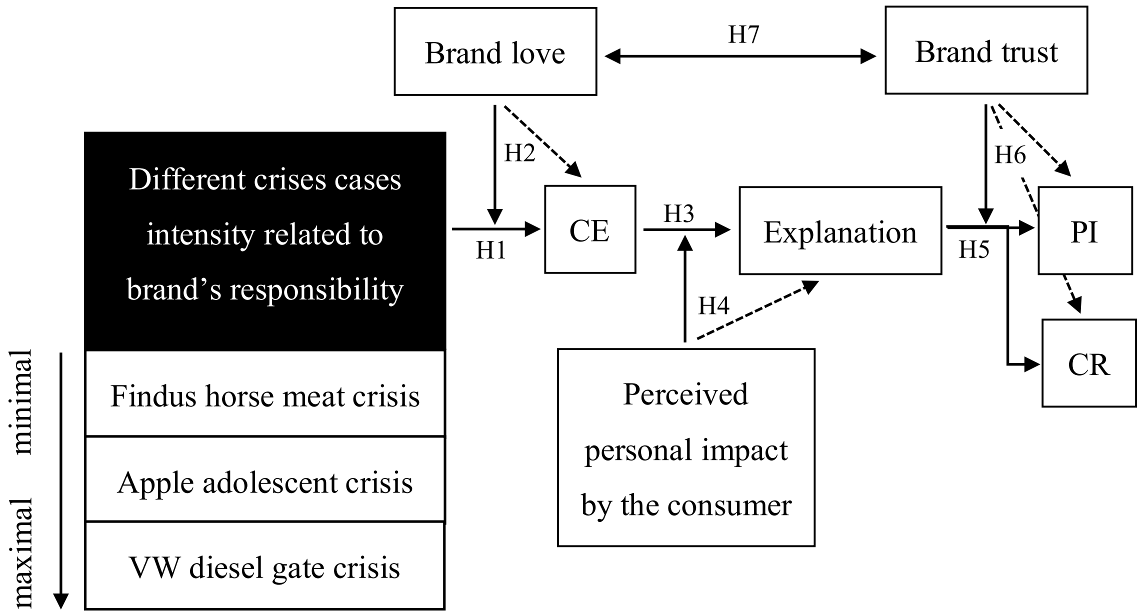
The identified (other than the identified and passionate) consumer said the unethical cases presented were not going to make her change her habits. One of the less identified ex-consumer said he would change his habits if other brands would be more ethical, and differentiate themselves in this way from the others. The passionate consumer was the only one saying he would change his habits if a new important and strong unethical case would emerge, which is in accordance with the emotional love moderator presented in the theoretical framework, showing that if the consumer is passionate about the brand but not passionately in love with it, he would backlash the brand even more than others in case of unethical information being disclosed. He said about changing his habits “Yes, if today there were serious cases that would be represented despite all that has already been there, and that the vigilance that they are supposed to have today ... if there were serious cases that would occur again, yes, you would be ... then it would be really abnormal ...”.

Going further

We can note the difference between an ex-consumer and an actual consumer about the perception of this brand. It appeared that the ex-consumers were not anymore identified with the brand at all, which was surprising as the Apple brand has strong brand equity, so some connections were expected to be still in the ex-consumers' mind. On the other hand, we should also note that it was hard for the persons of the group to express their feelings about the brands and their connections with it.

A quantitative study would be needed to analyse those factors, as well as in a way to analyse the isolated attitudes of the individuals, using maybe more straightforward terms than the ones used in the interview guide as the members of the group were sometimes hesitant with some terms, simplified then by the animator which encouraged further the discussion.

Quantitative study



This model appears similar, though with different approaches, to the one of Jeon & Baeck (2016) who had hypothesised that consumers with a strong brand-customer relationship and specific type of brand associations, characterised from our part precisely as brand love, would: retain favourable attitudes and purchase intentions, resist negative information, search for favourable information and counter-argue the negative information on the brand. We will also test the PI, while for the retaining of favourable attitudes we will more precisely test the CR. The resistance of negative information might be seen in the CE after the disclosure of the unethical case, while the counter-argument of the negative information on the brand will be observed in the 'Explanation' variable. We offer then a variant to the model of the study of Jeon & Baeck (2016), as we will test broader concepts after the disclosure of the crisis cases. We have added in our analysis the theory about the enmities toward a brand after the disclosure of unethical (and fraudulent) practices about a brand on the consumer, which was missing in their study. Also, we are focusing on analysing different brands linked to different unethical crises about consumers mostly based in Europe of more than 25-year-old, while they were focusing on the distinction between a CA and a CSR brand crisis, and had based their study on two fictitious coffee brands and used a sample of Korean students.

It seems more coherent about consumptions to target individuals from 25 to 65, as people are nowadays making more extended studies than before. 25-year-old appears then a good start in a way to have people buying and using products they would often have thanks to their job, working, and not merely thanks to their parents. This is confirmed by Wells (1993) who wrote that, "as everyone knows", students cannot be considered as typical consumers, and that findings based on students as consumers are always suspect and might be seen as less credible. To avoid as many students as possible, the threshold of 25-year-old appears adequate.

Hypotheses

According to Kerlinger (1972, as cited in Catane, 2000) and Tuckman (1972, as cited in Catane, 2000), hypotheses are being expressed in declarative sentence form, and they relate, either generally or specifically variable to variables. While for Goode and Hatt (1952, as cited in Sharma, 2008) hypotheses state what we seek, looking forward, as a proposition which can be put to the test to determine its validity.

The first hypothesis (H1) is that the different cases would bring different levels of CE. The average of CE for a brand with an essential number of associations, with significant brand equity like Apple should be more significant than the one of Findus. Though we are not sure about the case of VW as the brand has quite a strong brand equity but their responsibility for the crisis is maximal, and the crisis is on their core value. This is because according to Dawar & Lei (2009) the perceived seriousness of a crisis and its impact on the evaluation of the brand by the consumers are a function of the relevance of the crisis to the brand's key benefit associations. As a result, the crisis should be perceived very seriously, and the impact on CE noticeable for VW as the brand had shared previously massively the green value of their motors (Siano, Vollero, Conte, & Amabile, 2017). For the crisis of Apple, the fact of using adolescents does not appear to be highly relevant to their key benefit associations, the key benefit associations for Apple being more the ease of use, performance, and product integration (see the synthesis of the qualitative study here above, or qualitative study transcription in Appendix 14). We could think that to have quality ingredients is a crucial benefit association for the brand Findus, which could make consumers react even more negatively to the crisis and being even less engaged to the brand than what they would have been if the crisis had been on another topic.

The second hypothesis (H2) is that brand love would be a moderator of the relation between the attitude of the consumer after disclosure of the unethical case and the CE. After the unethical (and fraudulent) case would have been disclosed to the consumers, we expect them more engaged with the brand when there is a brand love than once it is inexistent. This would be following the results of Jeon & Baeck (2016) where the subjects with a strong brand-customer relationship tended to maintain their attitudes towards the brand, those with a weak brand-customer relationship tended to drop their attitudes by negative information.

The third hypotheses (H3) would be to test the effect of CE on the explanations of brand defence or reject of the brand. After the disclosure of the brand crisis case, an engaged consumer should defend the brand more than a non-engaged consumer. We stay in coherence with the theory previously established as the fact of rejecting the brand should have already happened before the consumer would talk about his engagement and his love for the brand. Also, the results of Jeon & Baeck (2016) support our hypothesis as they found that subjects with strong brand-customer relationship tended to have defensive attitudes toward the brand, were searching for the information supporting the brand, and counter-argued in this way for the brand after the disclosure of negative information.

The fourth hypothesis (H4) is that the perceived personal impact, being direct or indirect when affecting us through persons around us like our family or friends, would be a moderator between the consumer engagement and the explanation of the crisis. We expect engaged consumer who would perceive a personal impact of the case will have a more negative explanation than the other ones who would be engaged but who would not perceive the case having a personal impact on them, or the persons they care about around.

The fifth hypothesis (H5) would be the effect of the consumer explanations of the crisis on the PI (H5.1) and CR (H5.2) as if a consumer is saying he is feeling rejecting or defending the brand, his PI or CR should be related and incoherence. Also, we will be able to test in this way the hypothesis that engaged consumers have a higher PI and CR than unengaged consumer after the disclosure of the negative events. This would be in accordance with the results of Jeon & Baeck (2016) where it has been found that the subjects with a strong brand-customer relationship tended to maintain their attitudes towards the brand, trust and purchase intention, while those with a weak brand-customer relationship tended to drop their attitudes, trust and purchase intention after the disclosure of negative brand information.

The sixth hypothesis (H6) would be then that the brand trust would have a moderating effect between the explanation and the PI (H6.1), and between the explanation and the CR (H6.2). This has been proved already in the past, though, according to Aydin, Ar, & Taskin (2014), there is a need to evaluate the role of brand trust on the repurchasing behaviours of consumers. Even though purchase intention is not a perfect predictor of purchase behaviour, the relationship between the first and the second has anyway been observed as positive and significant (Morwitz, 1992). Additionally, Becerra & Badrinarayanan (2013) recognised there was the need to test the effects of brand trust on PI and CR with additional brands from different product categories. This is what we will intend to do. Becerra & Badrinarayanan (2013) had used athletic shoe brands and cars brand, also, their study had been made on a sample of students. We will then expand the product categories, and also verify, with the Volkswagen brand, the effects of brand trust on a sample other than students.

In addition to those hypotheses, we will add two more, which would be to verify the theory on the idea that brand love had a positive effect on brand trust (H7.1), and that brand trust had a positive effect on brand love (H7.2). Some very few papers were about this, and we expect in this way to fill in one more hole in the literature. This is following Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2009) for who an insufficient number of studies on the subject of brand love had been made, as a result, both antecedents and consequences of brand love would need further analyses. This is confirmed by the other study of Also, Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2013) where they explain that the concept of brand passion from brand love remains new and that a good understanding of the key determinants and outcomes of it demands more research. Also, Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2009) that we used in the literature for investigating the positive effect of brand love on brand trust had not used scales developed and tested in the literature, while, we have planned to do so.

Questionnaire

To be sure to have a maximum of our sample with emotional bonds with the brands we limited our questionnaires to consumers and ex-consumers of the brands. As it could be seen in the qualitative study, some ex-consumers might already not have anymore any identification with the brands, so it should give us already enough persons with little or no connection. This would give us also in this way the certainty to have respondents who know the brand well.

About the different items: the items for brand love are taken from Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2009); the items for the consumer engagement re from Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas (2016); the items from the consumer trust had been designed by Gurviez &

Korchia (2003a), we then based ourselves on the items of trust from Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2009) about the temporary deficiency acceptability to extend our items by taking, about this subject, one more item from to the research of Gurviez & Korchia (2003b); the items from the CR are from Stumpf & Baum (2016) and completed by the ones of Bruner (2012, p. 725) for the negative WOM; the PI items are from Spears & Singh (2004).

We took the 5 points level of agreement Likert-Type scale from Vagias (2006). As we had translated the questionnaire in Spanish and French, we used the Spanish 5 points level of agreement scale from Villar (2009), and the one showed by Swaen (2017) in a way to have it in French. For the intent to buy again the brand we used the likelihood 5-point-scales from Vagias (2006), while for the purchase interest scaled, from very low to very high, we used the 5-point-scales showed by Brown (2010).

Pre-test

The pre-tests have not been done statistically but more in a qualitative way. We submitted the questionnaire to a limited number of people in a way to have their reactions and see if they were comfortable with the questions. Before submitting it to them, we had followed the order of our model: disclosing the case, then asking about the brand love then the customer engagement, followed by the others. One of the individuals has been extremely involved and open to sharing us her impressions, and she said that she was not feeling “entering inside” the questionnaire as we were asking too directly how passionate she was with the brand. The others have then confirmed this. We then changed the order, putting the brand trust, followed by the PI and CR directly after the disclosure of the case. Keeping the order of the other questions has it was previously. We also added four more questions, derived from propositions made by the persons having made the pre-test, as they were missing questions which might make them think firstly about their intensity of use with the brand, and how close they were with it. Those four questions are the first ones after the disclosure of the crisis cases (see Appendix 15) and have not been planned to be analysed.

Sample

As it can be seen in Appendix 16: sample analysis, our sample is composed of 130 consumers, 85 women (65.4% of the total) and 45 men (34.6% of the total). The age means is of 41-year-old. We have in the sample 27 consumers of the brand Findus, 70 of Apple, and 33 of Volkswagen. We did not find data about the profile of the buyers from those three brands, as a result, we cannot assert if our sample is representative or not. The mean of the age of Apple is significantly lower than the one for Volkswagen. We divided our sample into three categories of age: from young adults for consumers between 25 and 38, middle-aged adults for the consumers of the age from 39 to 52, and aged adults from 53 to 65.

We can then see that in our sample we have for Findus the same percentage of young and aged adults (37% for both), but a lower percentage of middle-aged adults of about 11% less than the two others. For Apple we have more than 50% of young adults, then 30% of middle-aged adults and just a bit less than 15% of aged adults. For Volkswagen, we have 45% of middle-aged adults, 30% of young adults, and 24% of aged adults.

Our sample is mainly from Belgium, with more than 60% coming from this country. We have then nearby 20% from Spain, then 4% from France, 3% from the United Kingdom, 2% from Ireland, the Netherlands and Finland, then 1% from Canada, Lebanon, Luxembourg and the USA. We can notice the international character of our sample, coming mainly from Western Europe, and, more precisely mainly from Belgium. The leading brand that the individual from Belgium tended to answer as their last consumption or last use is Apple, and then the second one was Volkswagen. While for Spain it is Findus which had been answered the most. Findus is not anymore being sold in Belgium after its take over by Nomad Food. The group seemed to have had chosen to keep only their brand Iglo on the Belgian market. It was then primary to look for international consumers not to have only consumers from the Findus brand who had not consumed anymore the brand for a year or more. We could not find exactly when the Findus brand disappeared from the Belgium market.

Coming back to the gender, we can see that for Findus and Apple the consumers of our sample are mainly woman, with a percentage of slightly more than 70% for both brands. While for the Volkswagen brand our consumers are mainly men, of about 55%.

Variables

We have computed factorial analyses on the items of the different variables. In this way, we could, for some, diminish the numbers of items, and for others like brand love, we computed it in two dimensions: the dimension of emotion from the brand, and the one of accompaniment. The CR is the second variable which has been divided into two dimensions: the intention to recommend, and the intent to recommend precisely the buying action to people like friends (negative WOM dimension reverse coded).

What was interesting to notice during those factor analyses is that the item about “other brands did the same” had a high mean in general for each of the brand, over 3 which was the point of "neither agree or disagree". The means had been verified as not significantly different between the brands. Except for two individuals, the distribution of the data about this item was only over 3 for the brand Findus and Volkswagen. The consumers seem then to agree that other brands did the same kind of unethical practices, which is objectively true as it could be demonstrated in the analyses of the cases. This is verified with the qualitative study previously made, were everyone was agreeing that other brands had done the same thing, even the two individuals who were the most criticising the brand.

Quantitative study results

H1: effect of the different brands after disclosure of the case over the CE

There is a significant difference in the means of the items of CE only about the item of the 'attention', which is about to make time to think about the brand. The mean of Findus is significantly lower than the one of Apple at the level of error of 5%, and also significantly low than the one for Volkswagen at the level of error of 10%.

It is then surprising that only this item varies while we had assumed strong equities for Apple and Volkswagen in comparison to the one of Findus.

The total mean of the items of CE, forming then the CE variable, according to each brand is not significantly different from one brand to another.

H2: Moderator effect of brand love

From the accompaniment dimension of brand love, the item 'Memories' which is about the recall of memories like events associated with the brand has a significant moderator effect at the level of error of 10% on the relation between the brand, after disclosure of the unethical case, and the CE. We can see that consumers of Findus not having recognised any sign of memory are less engaged than the ones of Apple and Volkswagen for the same level of inexistent or very low memory. While once the level of memory is very high, the consumers of Findus appear more engaged than the ones of Apple and Volkswagen.

Also from the accompaniment dimension of brand love, the item 'Dream' which is about to have dreamt of possessing the brand, there is a moderator effect at a significant level of error of 5%. In this way, consumers who had not dreamt of possessing the brand are just a bit more engaged for the brand of Apple and Volkswagen than the ones of Findus, while surprisingly when the consumers have dreamt of possessing the brand the ones of Findus will be more engaged than the ones of Apple and Volkswagen.

We tested the general effect of moderations on the two dimensions of brand love. Unfortunately, they are just not significant enough to affirm a significant interaction effect at the error level of 10%. Though we can note that graphically the effect seems well to be moderating the relation for both dimension, going in the same direction as the results of the two items of the accompaniment dimension, but as it is not significant we cannot affirm it.

The direct effect of the dimension of brand love on CE was significant, while the interaction was not. We then tested a regression of the two-dimension on the CE. The results are that the model explains 47,9% of the variability of the CE mean variable. The slopes have been seen as significant at the level of error of 1%, with the equation being following one: $Y = 0.289 + 0.557*X1 + 0.197*X2$. We can then assert a positive effect of the two dimensions of brand love, the emotion and the accompaniment, on the CE.

The two factors of brand love have then been tested to see if there was any significant difference in the means of those dimensions between the brands. Only for the accompaniment dimension, at a level of error of 10%, the mean for the consumers of Apple is seen as lower than the one of the consumers Volkswagen. At a level of error of 10%, the consumers of Volkswagen would be then more in love than the ones of Apple according to the accompaniment of the brand. This brings us back to the relation and emotive bond consumers could have with a brand, which had been presented in the theoretical framework. The consumers of Volkswagen would then have a stronger emotional bond about the relationship with the brand as an accompaniment, than the ones of Apple after the disclosure of the case.

H3: CE effect on the type of explanation

About the binary variable of CE, we have 67 consumers who are non-engaged consumers, while 63 are seen as engaged consumers. We can see that the proportion of non-engaged consumers is more prominent for the brand Findus (around 60%) and Volkswagen (around 55%) in comparison to engaged consumers, while for the brand Apple it is the engaged consumers who are with a more significant proportion (slightly above 50%) in comparison to the non-engaged ones.

After having split the sample according to the brands, we can see that significantly for the brands Findus and Apple, based on the engagement of consumers, the mean to defend the brand is significantly higher for engaged consumers in comparison to the non-engaged ones. The fact of saying the case of being not so serious is also significantly with a higher mean for engaged consumers, in opposition to non-engaged consumers, for the three brands this time. The will to omit to talk about the case had not been proved to be significantly different from engaged and non-engaged consumers of each of the brand.

We also verified the other explanations which had been deleted in the factorial analysis, and the idea of not giving the responsibility of the case to the brand is significantly higher for the engaged consumers of Findus, in comparison to the non-engaged ones.

We looked if there was any significant difference between the means which had been seen as significant explanations inside each brand, though this time comparing the effect of the brands, the sample not being split. The mean was significantly higher for Findus in comparison to Apple about not giving the responsibility of the case to the brand.

We split then the sample in two instead of in three according to the brand, about the engagement of the consumer to see if there would be another interesting result.

We got then the results that for engaged consumers, the mean about not giving the responsibility of the case to the brand was significantly higher for Findus in comparison to Apple and Volkswagen at a level of error of 5%.

It was equally the case for the feeling to defend the brand about the case, where again the mean was significantly higher for the engaged consumers of Findus in comparison to the ones of Apple and Volkswagen.

About the tendency of perceiving the case as not so serious, the engaged consumers of Findus had a higher mean than the ones of Apple at a level of error of 5% again. It was equally the case for the engaged consumers of Findus in comparison to Volkswagen, but this time at a level of error of 10%. Surprisingly, the engaged consumers of Volkswagen are significantly perceiving the case as less severe than the engaged consumers of Apple at a level of error of 10%. It is the only significant difference between the means of Apple and Volkswagen about the explanation type, the others not being significantly different between them.

H4: Moderator effect of feeling personally affected by the case between the relationship of CE and the type of explanation

For testing the moderator effect, we computed a mean with the three remaining items of the 'Explanation' type. Those three items appeared to represent well the defence of the brand once their values are high, while it seems like consumers are more rejecting or at least not defending the brand once their values are low. We compared this total mean between the brands, with the results that the consumers of the brand Findus are significantly more defending the brand about the case than the ones of Apple, at a level of error of 5%. While at a level of 10%, we could also see that the consumers of Findus were also significantly more defending the brand about the case than the ones of Volkswagen. The means of Apple and Volkswagen about defending or not the brand not being significantly different between them.

The interactions of the three types of items about the feeling to be personally affected by the case were not significant. Though their direct effects on the explanation were significant. We then computed a mean of those three items to make the 'concerned by the case' dimension, about the fact of being personally affected by the case. We then launched a regression between this dimension and the type of explanation mean showing a defence or not with the brand. We got the results that the fact that the model explains 15,4% of the variability of the explanation type variable. Significantly, at the level of error of 1%, we could analyse a negative relationship about the fact of being concerned personally by the case on defending the brand about the unethical case. The equation is the following: $Y = 3.748 - 0.449*X$.

H5.1: The explanation type over PI

We computed then a binary variable showing the consumers defending the brand and not defending the brand, from the 'Explanation' mean. More than 60% of the consumers of Findus in our sample are defending the brand according to our analyses, while the consumers of Apple have the same proportion of defending and not defending the brand. Slightly less than 60% of the consumers of Volkswagen are seen as not defending the brand.

About the intention to repurchase the brand, the consumers defending the Apple and Volkswagen brand about the case have significantly, at a level of error of 5%, a more significant intention to rebuy the brand in comparison to the non-defending ones.

About the interest to purchase again the brand, the consumers of Apple only, defending the brand, have a higher mean than the ones not defending it.

Splitting the sample in two about the fact of seeing the consumer as defending or not defending the brand did not show any significant differences between the means of the different brands.

H5.2: The explanation type over CR

We first analysed the differences in the means splitting the according to the brand.

For the recommendation of the brand, only the defending consumers of Volkswagen have been analysed as having significantly a higher mean than the ones not defending it, at a level of error of 5%.

About the enthusiasm in the recommendation of the brand, the consumers defending the brand Findus and Apple have been found to significantly have a higher mean in comparison to the ones not defending each of those brands, at a level of error of 5%.

For the reversely coded item about the action to recommend to friends not to buy the brand, the defending consumers of Apple were the only to have significantly at a level of error of 5% a higher mean (a lower mean, if not reverse coded) in comparison to the ones not defending it.

We split then the sample not anymore according to the brand but according to be defending or not the brand about the case. This could help us to see if between the brands some consumers of some brands have a higher mean than others being also defending the brand, or also not defending the brand.

At the level of error of 5% we could see that inside the group of consumers who are not defending the brand about the case, the consumers of Apple and Volkswagen have a higher mean about the enthusiasm in the recommendation than the ones of Findus significantly. This is true also inside the group of consumers defending the brand.

H6.1: Brand trust as a moderator of PI

We computed a total mean about the two factors of the PI of our model in a way to analyse the moderating effect.

Any item had been found as having a moderating effect on the relation between the fact of defending or not the brand and the PI.

Though the items had been seen as always being significant at the level of error of 5% about the direct effect on the dependent variable: the PI. As a result, we launched a regression between the total mean of the items of brand trust on the mean of PI. The model explains 35,2% of the variability of the PI mean variable. We can assert at the level of error of 1% a positive effect of the mean of brand trust over the PI, with this equation: $Y = 1.348 + 0.669*X$.

H6.2: Brand trust as a moderator of CR

Again, any item of brand trust had been found as having a moderating effect on the relation between the fact of defending or not the brand and the CR. Though all have a significant direct effect on the dependent variable at a level of error of 10%.

So we computed a regression of the mean of brand trust on the mean of CR. The model explains 46,8% of the variability of the CR variable. We can assert a positive effect of the brand trust over the CR at a level of error of 1%. The equation is the following: $Y = 1.796 + 0.545*X$.

H7.1: Direct effect of brand trust on brand love

The model explains 17% of the variability of the brand love variable. We can assert at the level of error of 1% a positive effect of the brand trust on brand love. The equation is the following: $Y = 1.681 + 0.388*X$.

H7.2: Direct effect of brand love on brand trust

We tested both dimensions of brand love: emotion and accompaniment, on the trust of the brand. 19.5% of the variability of the Brand trust variable has been seen to be explained by the model. Though, the dimension of accompaniment was far from being significant, while the dimension of emotion is significant.

We then launched a regression again but without the dimension of accompaniment. 19.5% of the variability of the Brand trust variable is explained by the model, which is as much as the previous model with the two factors of brand love. We can assert at the level of error of 1% a positive effect of the dimension of the emotion on the trust of a brand. The equation is the following: $Y = 1.910 + 0.430*X$.

CONCLUSIONS AND GENERAL DISCUSSIONS

Conclusions and discussions

In this study, we tested different factors and tried to have a model which could allow us to test different relationships and different direct effects efficiently in a way to take out as many relevant results as possible from our sample and fill in some apparent holes in the literature. The analysis of the literature showed us some studies being related to our research question but then having used a majority of students in the sample, which was not coherent once comparing consumers according to Wells (1993). Our idea has been to compare different negative cases, of brands from different product categories having different levels of brand equity, with different levels of responsibility with the case. We had analysed the cases deeply and made a qualitative study about two unethical cases of Apple in a way to be able to present the best type of question to the consumers and to be sure to ask only relevant questions which could be applied to the three brands and the three unethical cases. This allowed us then to compare the results between the three brands.

After the disclosure of the unethical cases, the brands with the biggest brand equity which are Apple and Volkswagen which are supposed to have in customer's mind the most positive associations were surprisingly not having their consumers from the sample significantly more engaged with in comparison to the ones of Findus. A lower mean for the consumers of Findus about their CE was only significantly observed with the item of CE about making time to think about the brand.

The moderator effect expected of brand love on the relation between the type of brand after the disclosure of an unethical case was only verified for the item about the memories recall of some special events related to the brand in consumer's life, and the item about to have dreamt of possessing the brand. When Findus consumers had a low-level value about those two variables, they were having a lower CE than the ones of Apple and VW. The tendency was then increasing with a bigger slope for Findus than for the two other brands until the line went over the ones of the two other brands significantly. This means that when consumers were having more memories about the brand and had dreamt more to have possessed the brand, the consumers of Findus were more engaged than the ones of the Apple and Volkswagen.

We suppose then two extremes with the brand Findus, with from one side uninterested consumers with no brand love, and on the other side consumers very much engaged with brand love, while the two other brands were having more constantly increasing lines starting at a higher level but then with a lower slope. A lower proportion of consumers of the brand Findus were engaged in our study in comparison to Volkswagen and Apple, Apple having approximately the same amount of engaged consumer than non-engaged consumers in our sample with then also slightly more consumers identified as 'engaged' than Volkswagen.

Our analysis allowed us to divide brand love interestingly in two dimensions: the emotion of the brand and the accompaniment. The variables about memories recall and dream to posses belonging to the accompaniment dimension. Precisely according to the accompaniment of the brand, the consumers of Volkswagen would be significantly more in love than the ones of Apple after the disclosure of the case. This could be because the consumers of Apple are expecting more for this brand which could then be translated as the "boomerang effect" detailed in the theoretical framework according to Sohn & Lariscy (2012). Though we cannot conclude much of this result as Apple is a younger brand than Volkswagen. Those two dimensions of brand love have also been analysed as having a significant positive effect on the CE.

Engaged consumers of the three brands have been seen as significantly perceiving the case as not so serious in comparison to non-engaged consumers. Engaged consumers of Findus and Apple also had a stronger feeling about defending the brand about the case than non-engaged consumers significantly. This confirms the results of Jeon & Baeck (2016) who found that subjects with strong brand-customer relationship tended to have defensive attitudes toward the brand, active engagement having been defined by Keller (2001) as possibly “the strongest affirmation of brand loyalty” (p. 15), loyalty is linked to a relationship with the brand from consumer’s part.

Comparing brands between them about defending the brand, the engaged consumers of Findus were more defending it than the ones of Apple and Volkswagen. We can balance it by the fact that it might be more complicated for Findus to get engaged consumers, and in our sample, the number of engaged consumers was lower than the number of non-engaged consumers for this brand. About the preference to omit to mention the case, no significant difference per brand between the engaged and non engaged consumers was identified which is going against the results of Dalman, Buche, & Min (2017) as we had assumed, according to their study, that a will to omit would be seen as a passive collaboration, a passive defence. Our results emphasise that non-engaged consumers also feel to omit to mention the case, which could be a way to protect their selves.

About the active defence, the Findus case has been seen as a CA crisis, linked to unethical and fraudulent practices from its suppliers, which has been investigated to often led participants to discount negative information about the crisis using positive information of a favourable prior reputation, which is seen an indirect defence (Sohn & Lariscy, 2012).

While for Volkswagen the case is extremely unethical first, before being a CA crisis, which would be in coherence with the theory as a strongly attached consumer would judge firm ethics as negatively as would do a weakly attached consumer (Schmalz & Orth, 2012) after the disclosure of some highly unethical practices from the brand, showing then negative behavioural intentions (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006).

The case of Apple has been analysed as moderately unethical being also a CSR crisis, but not a CA crisis. According to the results of Dalman, Buche, & Min (2017), the consumers should then act to the case in the same way if it would have been a CA crisis. We expected then, according to Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner (2012) a positive defensive response from Apple consumers’ part, acting about this case as a threat to the self, and having, as a result, their engaged consumers defending the brand as much as the Findus consumers. This is not the case as the engaged consumers of Apple are defending the brand less than the ones of Findus. During the qualitative study, we could understand that the consumers are not responding in the same way to a crisis which is recent or of some years ago. They were tending to say of the crisis of some years ago that it was far from now, defending the brand in this way, saying that the brand should have improved with time. The engaged consumers of Apple, though not being in front of a highly unethical case, could then feel less to defend the brand as the case is recent and then might be too painful to be perceived as a threat to the self, due to the high relevance of it.

On the other hand, defending and non-defending consumers of Apple and Volkswagen have a higher mean about the enthusiasm in the recommendation than the ones of Findus significantly. The WOM is then more positive for those two brands in comparison to the one of Findus, which could be because consumers are still more identified with those two brands and have more emotional bonds than the consumers of Findus. This would be in coherence with the literature presented in the theoretical part.

We did not find any moderator effect for the fact of being personally affected by the case, directly or indirectly, on the relation between being engaged or not and having explanations tending to defend the brand or not. The effect of interaction between brand trust on the relationship between defending the brand or not and the PI and CR was not significant either. Though, for the fact of being personally affected by the brand we found a direct negative effect on defending the brand. We found also a direct positive effect of the brand trust on the PI and the CR, confirming Becerra & Badrinarayanan (2013) who found that brand trust was alleviating the perceived risk related to purchasing and praising the brand for students. For Becerra & Badrinarayanan (2013) brant trust was also alleviating the risk of trusting the brand, which is also confirmed by our analysis in a late test made at the end of Appendix 16.

About the effect of brand trust on brand love we confirmed the results of Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2013) using two scales verified in the literature which is what was missing in their study. We could also verify the direct effect of brand love on brand trust, though this is applicable only for the dimension of the emotion. The result that brand love has a direct effect on brand trust is confirming the results of Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence (2009) who had shown that brand trust was an outcome of brand love using a sample being composed at 43% are students and having 66.3% of the individuals of the sample having less than 30-year-old. We can note the interesting contribution of our research as actually, the dimension of the accompaniment of brand love is not affecting brand trust.

Managerial implications

It appears that it is better to be recognised as not being responsible for the unethical case by some national organisation directly related to the case as it was the case for Findus. Apple did not have this chance, and this could be decisive in a customer's opinion as it might remove the weight of the negative facts on consumer's shoulders.

Also, related to the brand defence, Findus appears to have a bigger utilitarian than hedonic feature, while the two other brands, mainly Apple, could be seen as more hedonic than utilitarian. In the theoretical framework, it had been demonstrated according to Huber, Meyer, & Schmid (2015) that functional benefits are central to a long-term relationship. Should hedonic brands bet more on the utilitarian aspect of their brand to encourage a long relationship with the consumers, in a way to have consumers defending them more in case of an unethical crisis? Managers should in anyway not forsake the promotion of the hedonic feature of their brand, as the hedonic aspect should indeed help to create emotion in consumer's mind, which has been seen as increasing the evaluative associations of consumers with brand trust. This would be primordial as brand trust has been demonstrated as increasing the brand defence, the PI, and the CR even after an unethical case disclosed to the consumer.

Limitations and future research

We disclosed the cases to the consumers and got their immediate reactions about the brand they were consuming, which tended to be less positive than expected for the brands with higher brand equity. Though this does not give us the certainty that consumers will not go over their negative reaction with time. There is the hypothesis that consumers not knowing an unethical case of the brand will react more negatively directly after the disclosure, but then will forgive to the brand with more time to think. The fact of learning the case for the first time could have been asked in the questionnaire to verify this hypothesis partly, and future researches on this subject should assess this hypothesis.

We did not consider enough in our model the CSR of the companies. This is a dimension which should be added to the model in a way to have some possible effect on the fact of defending or not the brand, as CSR had been seen in the theory as affecting positively the identification of consumers. Unfortunately, we did not find a way to add it in our model efficiently.

Also, we explored the consideration of the consumers of being personally affected by the case, directly or indirectly. This approach had not been found in the literature. As a result, it would require further researches, with possibly the use of some scales which would have been proved statistically.

In addition to this, the fact of comparing brands from different product categories did not give us all the freedom about the type of question, as they needed to be the same for the different brands in a way to analyse the answers with ease. For the brands Apple and Volkswagen, we could have for instance asked if they had received the product they were consuming from the brand through their work or if they had bought it. The influence of the case could be then different on them. To counter partly this, we had asked consumers to pick first the brand they had last bought, and then the brand they would have lastly used, still appealing to consumers arising from the definition of the American Marketing Association presented in the theoretical framework. It might be interesting for future researches to consider investigating some negative cases disclosed about brands in the same product category. Even though this kind of study might be less generalizable, it would have the advantage of investigating more in detail the reactions of the consumers linked to the brand associations and the type of case.

Finally, our sample, composed of 130 individuals, was only of 27 for the Findus brand, which appeared to be insufficient when looking at the power of some tests a posteriori, having a power of around 50% on some occasions. A bigger sample for Findus should have been presented, and future studies should consider having samples significantly bigger than 30 individuals per brand.

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