Branding and consumers in the kitchen appliances industry context

An exploratory study with a focus on customer experience

Nicola Mantellina
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Abstract

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Researchers have shown that strategies focused on building long-term competitive advantage tend to be more profitable for businesses. Further, companies have traditionally put their focus on strategies and on marketing tangible attributes of products and services such as quality, price and so on to differentiate from the competitors (Mascarenhas et al, 2006). Nonetheless, researchers have studied that consumers do not put any more emphasis in those characteristics when purchasing product or services underlining the needs to put the consumer as central aspect of a firm’s strategy (Morrison & Crane, 2007). In addition, it has been found that focusing on customer experience and use of correct brand management techniques and marketing initiative nowadays drives the company to have a competitive advantage and long-term economic sustainability. All being said it is true both generically speaking and in the specific context of kitchen appliances. In fact, market research suggests that in the kitchen appliances industry companies have begun to compete along new dimensions, whereby putting the consumers and their experience as a central aspect of the business has become increasingly important for actors who wish to stay and be competitive in the business. However, in the existing literature, there is not accordance on how to define customer experience and scholars identified that it depends on the context, which makes it difficult and confusing when marketing experts and firms want to identify the key aspects to improve the experience of their customers. On top, it has been found that brand identities are more or less relevant depending on the context, country culture and such, where the brand market its product and services. In according to what said, the purpose of this study is to explore and identify the most important dimensions and touchpoints in the specific kitchen appliances context that has more impact on the customer experience, with the aim to better define customer experience in the kitchen appliances context that could give indication to companies operating in the market how to address to some extent those problematics. The research adopted an exploratory qualitative study design. Interviews were used to gather primary empirical data that together with secondary empirical data and insight from the literature review had allowed the researchers to explore and address the research questions and state conclusions that however cannot be considered conclusive according to the nature of the study. In addition, the research reveals that consumer experience is a broad topic that accounts for and depends of many different aspects all interconnected one to another. In addition, it has been found that the aspects around brands, consumer experience and its touchpoints vary not only in relation to the context in study, but as well according to different stakeholders that deal with them. In addition, in the consumer journey, critical aspects reside in both tangible attributes of products and services and intangible attributes that together become critical and in the specific context shape how people think about the brand, and consequently their experiences. Finally, a possible definition of customer experience according to what found was given.

Key words: brands, consumers, consumers experience, competitive advantage, loyalty, marketing, business strategy, brand loyalty, branding strategies, brand management theories.

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Foreword

This thesis represents the final assignment of the international Master Programme in Industrial Management and Innovation at Uppsala University. The study was jointly completed within the scope of the course Degree Project in Industrial Engineering and Management (30 ECTS) by Nicola Mantellina and Rosendo Solvas Navarro. The topic of the study was voluntarily chosen by the two authors.

The workload on the project was divided as follows:

- Work related to the arrangement of the interviews and communication with the participants of the study - Nicola Mantellina; however, both authors were present during the skype interview.

- Studying theoretical concepts of Brand Management panorama and relative topics - by Nicola Mantellina.

- Studying theoretical concepts of customer-centric thinking and relative topics - by Rosendo Solvas Navarro.

- Introduction, methodology, analysis, discussion and conclusion where be equally split between the authors.

In any case, the two authors kept a collaborative approach and providing each other mutual support throughout the development of the thesis. Before proceeding from one stage to another, all the sections were preventively discussed in order to decrease bias and establish a common vision and understanding.
Popular science Summary

Nowadays companies operate in an increasingly competitive market and the field of kitchen appliances is no exception. Market researches show that depending on the geographical area the market is shrinking or growing giving the possibility to companies to expand their market, attract new consumers, sell more products and offer more services, in other words, grow their businesses. However, due to the increasing competition, it is difficult for companies to stand out from the crowd. Recent studies had emphasized the necessity to put the consumer as the central aspect of business’ strategy in order to succeed both where the market is growing and shrinking, to keep ahead of the competition and retain/gain existing/new consumers. Although it is recognized that strategy focusing on marketing tangible attributes of a product are still very relevant in the whole business panorama, in the past decade many researchers had experienced through their research that consumers do not put an emphasis in those characteristics. In fact, what it seems to count the most for the consumers is the experience that they are expecting and will have with the relative product and service that firms are offering in the market. Thus, it is important for marketers to understand and define the customer experience and its relationship with the brand characteristics. A strategy that focuses on customer experience can drive the company to have a competitive advantage and long-term economic sustainability.

However, it is not as easy as it seems. It has been evaluated that there are problems connected to it. In fact, in the existing literature, researchers are not fully aligned with a precise description and definition of customer experience, which makes it difficult and confusing when marketing experts and businesses want to identify the key aspects able to improve the experience of their customers. In addition, problems reside in the contextualization of this customer-centric techniques, definition and brand approaches since, on top, it has been found that brand identities are more or less relevant depending on the context, country culture and such where the brand markets its products and services.

To tackle those research problems, we have managed to build six interviews with experts on customer experience, brand management and people that work in the kitchen appliances context and deeply consult an online forum to grasp the consumers’ perspectives on the topic. Then, with the help of existing literature, it has been possible to evaluate and juxtapose relationship, thoughts, different perspectives arising from the different type of empirical and non-empirical data available to drive an analysis and discussion. Therefore, studying relationship among brand characteristics, customer experience concepts together with the data gathered it has been possible to see that consumer experience is a broad topic that accounts for and depends on many different aspects all interconnected to one another. The aspects around brands, consumer experience and its touchpoints vary in relation to the context but as well according to different stakeholders. Reliability and price point in the kitchen appliances context rule the scene in the characteristics that most shape how consumer perceive a brand and finally their experiences. Intangible aspect and online community, to a lower extent, can enhance the customer experience. We also encourage more research that will definitely bring new evidence as support and/or completion of what it has been achieved in this study.
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Finally, the authors want to voice their thanks to the respective families and friends that gave a priceless support throughout the time spent apart while living in Sweden.

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1. Introduction

This chapter begins by introducing the thesis background, followed by a discussion whereby the problem is highlighted. The chosen topic is customer experience and subsequent to the problem discussion, the authors underline the purpose of the thesis in furtherance to better understand the role of customer experience as a strategic tool and to explore it in order to evaluate which are the most important dimensions and touchpoints to consider for enhancing it in a specific industry context. Moreover, a series of research questions as the natural outcome of the recognized problem together with the contributions that this study expects to deliver is given. Lastly, the chapter will also incorporate an overall outline of the thesis.

1.1 Background

Researchers have shown that strategies focused on building long-term competitive advantage tend to be more profitable for businesses (Aaker, 1992; Alrubyiee and Al-Nazer, 2010; Denoue and Saykiewicz, 2009). In addition, Parniangtong (2017) underlines the importance of adopting the right business strategy to compete in the market which enables businesses to gain a sustained competitive advantage. He continues stating that a company to be profitable does not only need to create a competitive advantage but needs to preserve this advantage through the years, hence, business strategies are the means to reach a sustained competitive advantage.

In addition, companies have traditionally put their focus on strategies and on marketing tangible attributes of products and services such as quality, price and so on (Mascarenhas et al, 2006). Nonetheless, researchers have concluded that such characteristics rarely determine purchasing decisions underlining the need to put the consumer as a central aspect of a firm’s strategy (Morrison and Crane, 2007). In fact, during the 1950s Peter Drucker introduced the concept that serving customers should be the focus of the businesses in his book The Practice of Management. Peter Drucker stated that the definition, production and prosperity of a business are determined by the customers. After him, many authors such as Philip Kotler and Levitt Theodore followed his concept and reaffirmed it, recognising the importance for business in focusing on the customer and fulfill their needs (Parniangtong, 2017). Other authors defined specific customer needs concepts such as customer service (Parasuraman and Grewel, 2000), customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1999), and customer loyalty (Reichheld, 2001).

It has been recognized that companies are committed to develop customer focus strategies, but they declare having difficulties defining and applying them (Parniangtong, 2017). Companies need to differentiate profitable from not profitable customers, with the aim to develop strategies to keep generating profit from the profitable customers and to convert the non-profitable ones, thus increasing the number of profitable customers. Furthermore, this requires a company’s ability to manage its relationship with its customers (Parniangtong, 2017). Customer focus strategies have been demonstrated to be the key to succeed in the current markets. The strategies aim with the creation of customer-value to differentiate from the competitors in the market, offering better opportunities and providing more value to the customers (Parniangtong, 2017). It is important for companies to have the ability to deliver customer value in a
sustainable way during a period of time, which is expected to contribute to the creation of loyal customers. In addition, it has been demonstrated that customer satisfaction has a direct impact into the profitability and customer equity, even if it is not always working in all context due to the complexity of the relationship between the concepts and the customer-firm relationships (Parniangtong, 2017). For that reason, there is a need for defining customer-management models to guide these relationships. “No frameworks exist to guide management through a comprehensive program to manage a customer from being a first-time buyer to becoming a lifetime loyal customer” (Parniangtong, 2017, p. 162). A simplified framework is that customer satisfaction drives customer loyalty that finally results in customer equity (Parniangtong, 2017), where customer satisfaction, it is defined as a direct response to a consumption experience. If the customer experience matches customer expectations, it results in customer satisfaction. It has been demonstrated that satisfied customers are more profitable, since they become more loyal, in fact, they repeat purchases and promote and recommend the brand. On top, loyal customers are more committed to the brand, becoming less price-sensitive and tolerant. Thus, can be stated that a satisfying customer experience leads to loyalty and finally, profitability. However, this is a complex process that needs to be managed along all the stages and interactions between the company and the customer, in other words, managed along the customer journey. The customer journey needs continuous attention from the firm to result in a long period of profitability. Customer experience and loyalty become the key since the cost to acquire new customers are much higher than keeping the existing ones (Parniangtong, 2017).

Recent marketing studies have shown that focusing on intangible assets such as customer experience is the key issue to be handled to gain, among others, a competitive advantage (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Berry et al, 2002). Thus, companies use Customer Relationship Management (CRM) to develop a competitive advantage (Douglas and Craig, 2000; Farinet and Ploncher, 2002; Kotler and Keller, 2006; Peppers and Rogers, 2000). Furthermore, to analyze the customer experience it has been demonstrated that rationalism is not the only aspect to take into account. In fact, the emotional aspects and the irrational sides of consumer behaviour are even more important to consider in building strong relationships between the ventures and its consumers (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Recent studies about economics and marketing discovered that intangible elements are highly linked to the customer perception of irrational aspects and emotions (Gentile, Noci and Spiller, 2007). Additionally, 85% of the business managers believe that the traditional aspects used for market differentiation, like price, quality or product features are not sustainable in terms of development of competitive advantage nowadays, hence, giving more importance to customer experience as a key factor in the current competitive markets (Shaw and Ivens, 2005).

Researchers have been considering different approaches to give a definition to customer experience during the last years, but there is no agreement on it. LaSalle and Britton (2003), considered a holistic experience approach in which in every interaction between the consumer and the brand, the consumer is considered as a person and not just as a customer. Pine and Gilmore (1999), considered the memorability of the different interactions between the customer and the company. Another approach is the experience of co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), which defines that companies provide a platform to consumers, that can
be used by them to co-create their own experience. On top, the dimensionality of customer experience has been defined with different approaches regarding its context, such as industry, market, etc. O’Loughlin, Szmigin and Turnbull (2004) in the context of the Irish financial services, divided customer experience in three concepts, brand experience, transactional experience and relationship experience. Mascarenhas et. al (2006) stated that customer experience is composed of physical and emotional elements, and they are affected by the customer and the specific context. Gentile et al. (2007) define the customer experience as a structure of the following components, sensorial, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle and relational. Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) on the other hand stated that customer experience is composed of four factors of experience, sensorial, affective, behavioural and intellectual. This lack of agreement results in an organisational and economic problem where the main field affected is marketing since brands use marketing strategies and theories to approach customers and build brand loyalty and brand recognition but can also impact the brand with organisational changes or in its product development. In addition, it has been studied that brands that will be able to give a unique and distinctive experience by managing both the functional and emotional elements of a service or product can establish brand loyalty (Berry et al, 2002; Haeckel et al, 2003; Morrison and Crane, 2007).

Moreover, many pieces of literature about marketing, brand management, consumer culture and many others in different fields have been recognized the importance of the role that establishing a strong brand has to the long-term success and profitability of companies. Keller (2001), in his work, underlines the importance for companies to build a strong brand and the benefit that brands with substantial equity have in terms of greater customer loyalty, less market vulnerability and competitive advantage that drives profitability. Moreover, Keller in its model of brand building called Customer-Based Brand Equity model highlights the necessity of focusing on the brand and how it is connected with the consumers, in fact “the power of a brand lies in what customer have learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand over time ... the power of a brand resides in the minds of customer ... a challenge in creating a strong brand resides in ensuring that customers have the right type of experiences with the product and services so the desired thoughts, feeling, images, beliefs, perception and so on become linked to the brand” (Keller 2001, p3). Meaning that customers play a central role which is aligned to what it has been said previously in this text when businesses should consider adopting customer centricity strategies to gain among others a competitive advantage. In addition, many other literature (Aaker, 1992; Aaker, 2002; Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy and Pervan, 2011) and other well-known industry models of brand equity, such as Young and Rubicam’s Brand Asset model and Millward Brown’s Brand Dynamics model, have been written in order to give indication on how to manage and build a strong brand in terms of brand equity and explaining what it is and how to achieve it: awareness, perceived quality, loyalty and so on. However, Hedig et al. (2009) argue that the different existing frameworks tend to fade out the differences and similarities between different approaches in brand management leaving the researchers confused. Hence, he is underlining the necessity and importance for businesses to have a holistic view of brands, it is crucial to understand the meaning, the approaches and how to manage them since they are a valuable if not the most valuable aspect for companies to differentiate from the competitors.
All being said, the industry context where the thesis put its focus is the household appliances industry and specifically the appliances in the kitchen environment. The household appliances segment includes cooking appliances (cookers, microwaves, ovens, and such), refrigeration appliances (fridges freezers, and such), washing appliances (washing machines, dishwashers, and such), air conditioning systems and vacuum cleaners. The kitchen appliances, which are a subcategory of the household appliances can be further divided into major and minor appliances. For instance, the former includes ovens, fridges and freezers and the latter includes microwaves, kettles, and toaster. Furthermore, market research shows that in the kitchen appliances industry consumers and their overall experiences with a brand play an important role when buying decisions and repurchase decisions are made. Thus, underlining the fact that consumers and their experiences are more and more seen as the central aspect of a firm not only generically speaking as discussed above but as well in the specific industry of kitchen appliances. The market research done by Lucintel (2014), Mordor Intelligence (2018) and Datamonitor (2015) also suggests that kitchen appliances industries have begun to compete along new dimensions, whereby experience has become increasingly important for actors who wish to stay and be competitive in business. In addition, the kitchen appliances’ market has grown in recent years and is expected to grow in the next few years giving the possibility to both new and already existing actors to focus their attention not only into marketing the best product possible in terms of reliability, design and such but as well to focus on delivering better customer experiences since, as seen, focusing on intangible assets it is the key issue to be handled to gain, among others, a competitive advantage and to differentiate from the competitors (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Berry et al, 2002). Finally, the research conducted by Datamonitor (2015) suggests that where the market of kitchen appliances is substantially growing there is an opportunity for businesses to increase their sales and market share and possibly gain and grow new loyal customers. On the other hand, where the market is struggling, the challenges for businesses among others, reside in the ability to differentiate one from another. For both situations, researchers and market studies suggest that customer-centric strategies are the strategies to be pursued in order to differentiate from competitors and to deliver better customer experiences, as discussed previously.

1.2. Research Problem & Purpose

In recent decades, studies have highlighted that focusing on customer experience and use of correct brand management technique and marketing initiative drives companies to have a competitive advantage and long-term economic sustainability. However, in the existing literature, there is not accordance on how to define customer experience and scholars identified that it depends on the context, which makes it difficult and confusing when marketing experts and firms want to identify the key aspects to improve the experience of their customers. On top, it has been found that brand identities are more or less relevant depending on the context, country culture and such where the brand markets its products and services.

Thus, considering the lack of consensus when giving a definition to customer experience in the existing researches (Rageh Ismail et al., 2011) and the demonstrated importance of the concept towards brand equity and its role to build competitive advantage (Aaker, 1992; Alrubaiiee and
Al-Nazer, 2010; Denoue and Saykiewicz, 2009), the purpose of this study is to identify and explore which are the most important dimensions and touchpoints to consider for enhancing customer experience and building brand equity in the kitchen appliances industry. In order to achieve that, it is aimed to give a definition to customer experience in the specific context, since research has shown that the context and the dimensions involved differentiate the definition of customer experience (Rageh Ismail et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is important to understand customer experience and its relationship with the brand management field theories and concepts like loyalty and brand identities, since it is demonstrated that they give among other benefits, long-term profitability and competitive advantage in the market and could enhance customer and their experiences (Aaker, 1992; Alrubaiiee and Al-Nazer, 2010; Denoue and Saykiewicz, 2009).

We believe that the results of our study will lead to a better understanding of the context and the customer experience involved in it, despite the found lack of agreement on giving a definition to the concept. From our point of view, the identification of the most important dimensions of the contextualized customer experience and its relationship with the brands will provide a picture of the most crucial aspects, such as product characteristics and services, among others, that will give competitive advantage to brands in the current continuously growing market (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Berry et al, 2002; Lucintel, 2014; Mordor Intelligence, 2018; Datamonitor, 2015). Hence, the lack of consensus, theoretical foundation and agreement among the definition of customer experience is a problem that does not only apply to the particular context of kitchen appliances, it applies also to the entire variety of context, resulting in a universal problem.

1.3. Research question

There are different definitions, touchpoints and dimensions of customer experience that are affected by the context involved and customer experience have an important role in its relationship with brand loyalty and its competitive advantage outcome. Since the main purpose of this study is to explore and identify the most important contextual dimensions that impact customer experience, with the aim to better define customer experience in the kitchen appliances industry, the thesis is guided by the following, overarching question:

Which are the most important dimensions and touchpoints to consider for enhancing customer experience and building brand equity in the kitchen appliances industry?

Consequently, in order to answer the main question, we will break it into three sub-questions:

**SQ1:** How is customer experience defined in the kitchen appliances industry?

**SQ2:** Which are the most important touchpoints during the customer journey that affect the customer experience in kitchen appliances context?
**SQ3:** Which are crucial characteristics of a brand that affect the customer experience in kitchen appliances context?

**1.4. Contributions**

The research contributes to add knowledge about customer experience in a specific context, to better understand branding approaches in the management field and how those topics are connected one to another. In addition, since in the definition of customer experience there has been a lack of consensus among the literature and the marketing experts, the research provides a new possible definition based on the findings, contributing to the marketing field that lacks a contextualised discussion around the topic.

The research emphasizes the importance of delivering a positive customer experience and how this could guarantee to the businesses to retain consumer and gain a competitive advantage against the competitors. Further, the research underlines that customer experience is a broad concept that involves many factors and raises many problematics that needs not to be overlooked by businesses.

The results of this study could be applied or slightly modified to be applied also to other contexts with similar dimensions, contributing to set this thesis as a starting point of other studies. Furthermore, we consider that the application of the results in a brand environment could affect the current marketing strategies that brands use to approach customers.

**1.5. Disposition**

The thesis involves six chapters figure 1 below.

![Figure 1 - Disposition of the thesis](image)

In the first chapter, a short background and problem discussion are provided to the reader. The purpose and the subsequent research question and sub-questions are the natural outcomes of it. Further, the chapter addresses the thesis contributions to the field of study. Continuing in the second, it is found the theoretical framework used to direct the researcher in the development of the thesis work and to drive the analysis. The first part consists of the literature about brand management, theories and models. In the second part, the literature goes around the concepts of customer centricity thinking, customer equity, customer value and customer experience. When the third, the method chapter, is reached, an outline of the research approach, the process and motivation for pursuing a qualitative study as well as ethical and quality considerations are shown to the reader. In the fourth, the empirical findings are presented. The empirical findings derived from both primary and secondary sources, namely qualitative interviews and an online
community forum. In addition, here, the findings are juxtaposed with the concepts presented in the literature review to drive the analysis and finally to present a discussion where the research questions are answered. The first sub-question is the consequence of the analysis performed in the fourth chapter about the different perspective of the expert interviewed, juxtaposed with what it has been theoretically studied by different researchers and presented throughout the literature review. Moreover, it has been relied on a user forum and experts’ views in connection with the concept, models and approaches reviewed in the theoretical framework to perform an analysis that as a result had allowed addressing the second and third sub-question. All being said, advancing to the fifth chapter, the research question and its sub-questions are answered. Finally, chapter six outlines the research limitations, suggestions for further research and ethical issue connected to this thesis.
2. Theoretical framework

This chapter will provide insight of existing research in the field of strategic management and marketing management with their relative dimensions and concepts. Hence, we map out theories used to investigate the field in search of the most appropriate one for our purpose. This review will mostly account for literature regarding marketing and consumer behaviour as topics of interest.

2.1 Strategic Management

This first section will explore different concepts related to strategic management. Thus, topics of customer-centric thinking, customer equity, value and satisfaction will be addressed and briefly introduced which will set the base for the next section and to better define concepts that go around and are related to the theoretical panorama of customer experience.

2.1.1. Customer-centric strategies

Businesses have been following multiple strategies with the aim to improve and become more profitable. As mentioned early in the historical background, until the early 1950s these strategies were focused on the product or service offered but was around that period when Peter Drucker introduced in his book, The Practice of Management, the concept of customer centricity. Drucker (1954, p. 32), recognized the importance of the role of customers for businesses success, stating that “what customer considers value is decisive, it determines what a business is, what it produces and whether it will prosper.” Following Drucker steps, many authors that will be mentioned along this study reaffirmed the importance of customer focus for businesses. Customer centricity puts the customer as the most important asset for a business since it is believed that the business cannot exist without serving its customers and generate profit from them. In addition, customer-centric strategies focus on maximizing customer equity, which is the sum of the customer lifetime value of each customer (Silveira, 2017). The customer lifetime value is the prediction of the net profit generated during the future relationship with the customer (Parniangtong, 2017). Based on these concepts, it could be stated that customers are the most valuable assets for business over its relationship lifetime, which will result in future sustainable economic profitability. Not all customers have the same customer lifetime value, in fact, each customer has its own profitability for the business. For that reason, it is needed customer-focus management strategies, which will emphasize aspects of the acquisition of new customers, convert the unprofitable customer relationships into profitable relationships and enhance the already profitable customer relationships (Parniangtong, 2017).

Michael Porter (1980), defined that enterprises should create customer value, meeting customer expectations, while creating value for the shareholders that exceeds their investment, resulting in profit for the shareholders. The relationship between customer lifetime value and its profitability brings us to an important concept, customer loyalty drives to profitability. Furthermore, companies should not expect to recruit profitable customers in the early
beginning, since customer profit will increase over time through loyalty. It is known that loyal customers are more tolerant and less price-sensitive for that reason customer lifetime value and customer equity become highly important making long-term customer relationships highly valuable to a firm (Parniangtong, 2017). There are different drivers that can influence and contribute to customer equity. It is very important to know well the customers, to understand their needs and work to respond to them in the best possible way, with the aim to have customers with well-satisfied needs. In addition, it becomes important to appreciate and to treat customers as the most important asset of the company, with respect and honesty, with the aim to maintain them and convert customers into loyal ones with a profitable relationship over the longest possible period of time, providing to them a good experience that it is painless and without complications (Parniangtong, 2017). In fact, applying customer equity drivers could result in customer satisfaction. Satisfied customers will become more likely to repeat purchases, and less sensitive to product prices. On top, satisfied customers contribute to cross-selling and up-selling which also boost the firm’s profitability. It is considered that the most valuable customers are the most profitable and loyal customers. The value of customers and the derived profit that customers can deliver to a firm, encourage to consider customers as assets (Parniangtong, 2017).

Further, it has been experienced that there is a change of mindset towards product-centric strategies (Parniangtong, 2017). In market research, the new mindset is to focus on a specific group of customers and deeply understand their needs to satisfy them. The marketing mindset emphasizes on the relationship with the customer, looking for the longer, more profitable and more loyal possible relationship. In terms of sales, keeping customers becomes more important rather than to sell products, there is an effort on offering solutions to the targeted group of customers. In pricing, instead of determining the price for the product cost, and specific price barriers, the price is determined for the set of products and services that the company provides its customers. Customer needs can change quickly, thus, it requires ability and flexibility from the suppliers to adapt and meet customer needs fast and without meeting the product or service quality. The production process requires flexibility and adaptability as well, to easily confront the specific situations that customer needs will highlight. As overall, customer-centric strategies focus on the customer and strive to improve customer equity (Parniangtong, 2017).

2.1.2. Customer Equity

As mentioned, the value of a firm is driven by customer equity, which is the sum of the customer lifetime value of each customer. Customer lifetime value is the profit that a customer is expected to generate in the future during the relationship with the firm. Due to these concepts, it is believed that customer equity determines the company's value (Parniangtong, 2017). Customer equity could be difficult to measure since future is uncertain and unpredictable, but the concept highlights the importance of the customer as the central aspect of the firm and as the most important asset when defining the business model and when formulating the business strategy. Despite the importance of customer equity, it does not represent the total value of the company, which also includes other assets and competencies, such as physical and intellectual properties, but customer equity gives a reliable vision of the future of the company, and how it
can be forecasted the future revenues and profit. Thus, results in the importance of formulating a business strategy that focuses on managing and gain competitive advantage through the creation of customer equity.

Lemon et al. (2001) proposed a framework that describes customers equity and defines what are the key drivers to improve customer equity. The growth drivers defined by the authors that enhance customer loyalty, and finally, customer equity is value equity, brand equity and relationship equity. Value equity refers to the customers perspective of the brand utility, what the customer receives for what he gives to the company (Parniangtong, 2017). There are different sub-drivers of value equity, and it is believed that they directly depend to the context or industry, but the most important ones are quality, price, convenience and shopping environment (Lemon et al., 2001). It is believed that value equity affects customer experience that will drive customer satisfaction. Another driver is brand equity, which refers to the customer subjective and intangible perception of the brand (Parniangtong, 2017). Lemon et al. (2001) define as key sub-drivers of brand equity, the brand image, brand awareness and brand perception. The third driver is relationship equity, which refers to the willingness of the customers to keep the relationship with a brand or company, and it is driven by marketing programs like loyalty or social programs. (Lemon et al., 2001).

2.1.3. Customer Value

As mentioned, to put the customer at the centre of the firm’s strategy is important to improve customer equity and to reach customer loyalty. Thus, it is crucial to understand the customers and what it is valuable for them. For that reason, it is highlighted the concept of customer value. To have a better understanding, it is required to understand what the meaning of the concept of value is, “value is the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what it is received and what it is given” (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14). Regarding customer value, the concept is fragmented in different points of view, that results in different definitions given to the concept by several authors. This fact could explain why the understanding and application of the concept in the firms is difficult and makes hard to take full advantage of customer value. Otherwise, based on his empirical research about customer thinking and behavior, and considering the desired and the received value of the customers, Woodruff’s (1997, p. 142), gives a definition to customer value, “customer value is a customer’s perceived preference for an evaluation of those product attributes, attribute performances, and consequences arising from use that facilitate (or block) achieving the customer’s goals and purposes in use situations”. The understanding of customer value is important for companies’ survival and to gain a competitive advantage.

Once identified the customer value, it is possible to try to anticipate what the customers will consider more valuable in the future, this concept is known as customer value anticipation. Flint, Blocker and Boutin (2011, p. 219), defined customer value anticipation as “the supplier’s ability to look ahead at what specific customers will value from supplier relationships including their product and service offerings and the benefits they create given the monetary and non-monetary sacrifices that must be made to obtain those offering benefits”. The empirical study
carried by Flint, Blocker and Boutin (2011), highlights the importance of customer value anticipation and its relationship with customer satisfaction and customer loyalty since customers will be more satisfied and will be more loyal to the firms that have the ability to anticipate their future needs and their desires. It is important to create customer value, but it is also important to anticipate what the customers will consider more valuable in the future. This concept differs from the firm’s flexibility and ability to adapt to the new customers’ needs, although both are addressing changes in customer needs (Flint, Blocker and Boutin, 2011). The implementation of this concept has a direct impact on the company’s management and strategies. Although putting the customer as the central aspect of the firm, it is needed to consider the concept of customer value anticipation in the management of the customer relationship with the company. Companies also have to recognize customer forecasting and future needs, to consider them in the decision-making process of the firm and develop dynamic customer relationship management strategies (Flint, Blocker and Boutin, 2011).

2.1.4. Customer Value Proposition

It has been recognized the relevance of customer value and which are the benefits for the firms when considering it in the formulation of the company strategy to be able to anticipate the customer future desires and needs. Hence, highlights the importance for companies to offer value to the customers, the customer value proposition. Customer-value proposition is defined as the value in terms of benefits that the supplier is offering or proposing to its customers (Parniangtong, 2017; Patala et al., 2016). A customer value proposition is more than a sales pitch showing to the customers what the company offers with the aim to catch customers attention, it needs to meet customers’ expectations (Parniangtong, 2017). Furthermore, the customer value proposition is the reflection of the firm’s strategy (Kaplan and Norton 2001; Lehmann and Winer, 1991), building a commitment with the customer and its relationship, how the firm will serve the customer and will take care of the future needs and expectations. Along the marketing literature, it is possible to find authors describing different ways to develop customer value propositions, but most of them are based on the consideration of value proposition as an economic or monetary benefit. This point of view does not consider the value of other intangible aspects or benefits that the firms can offer to its customers through the customer-value proposition, such as environmental, social, product quality, public image, energy usage or safety benefits (Patala et al., 2016). Since customer-value propositions are a key concept for the firms, it is needed to improve them integrating intangible benefits that will impact the customer experience and will enhance customer equity. Patala et al. (2016) suggest that whenever possible the intangible benefits should be monetized and integrated into the value proposition in order to demonstrate the indirect value of this benefit to the customers.

2.1.5. Customer Satisfaction

Through the customer-value proposition is possible to achieve customer acquisition, but to build a relationship with the first-time customer, it is needed to satisfy the customer expectations proposed in order to encourage them to repeat purchases and increase the chances to build a lifetime and loyal relationship. It is believed that customer satisfaction will encourage
the customer to take a journey with the company and building a relationship that will enhance customer equity, which will result in profitability for the company. Although customer satisfaction will lead to customer equity and profitability, the reality is more complex and the variety of customers can result in other specific situations, such that firms can also make a profit from unsatisfied customers and occasional customers (Parniangtong, 2017).

Gise and Cote (2000) carried a study about the definition of customer satisfaction, highlighting the lack of consensus and the complexity to give a definition to the concept, resulting in an important limitation for consumer satisfaction research. Although the lack of consensus and the differences between the definitions, it has been identified as common elements shared by all of them. These elements are that consumer satisfaction is a response and this response has a particular focus and time (Gise and Cote, 2000). In general terms, consumer satisfaction is a summary affective response towards and evaluation process of varying intensity in a time-specific point with limited duration focusing on aspects of product acquisition and consumption. The type of affective response, the intensity, the specific time and duration and the focus of interest will directly depend on the context of interest defined by the researcher (Gise and Cote, 2000). Gise and Cote (2000) suggest that once identified the details about the elements mentioned and the customer group, researchers should develop or choose from the existing ones a specific definition in the particular context and domain of interest of the research. The authors state that there are no guidelines for the selection of a proper definition, which makes the selection of a definition for the concept idiosyncratic. Due to the complexity and the dependency to the specific context, it is believed the impossibility to give a generic definition to customer satisfaction that will work to the whole variety of context (Gise and Cote, 2000). However, as a general concept Parniangtong (2017, p. 165) states “Customer satisfaction is generally defined as the customer response to a consumption experience”. The satisfaction is measured towards their expectation created by the customer-value proposition, and if the experience meets the customer expectations, it is believed that results in customer satisfaction.

Regarding the type of response, it is a combination of cognitive and affective dimensions. The intensity of the type of response becomes a key aspect to consider since it refers directly to the strength of the satisfaction response (Gise and Cote, 2000). The timing of the response is an important aspect to consider since customer satisfaction can be determined in different points and periods of time with various durations, such as post-purchase, pre-purchase, before, during and after consumption, etc. It is needed to evaluate in the specific context, which is the most relevant timing of response, in order to acquire reliable information for the research (Gise and Cote, 2000).

2.2. Marketing Management

In this section of the literature review, the concept of customer experience, which is a natural consequence of the previous section, is further analysed. Thus, dimensions and touchpoints of customer experience are presented. Further, different brand management approaches, that are believed are influencing how customers perceive a brand and thus influencing the customer
experience are displayed, focusing particularly in the ones that are believed will be the most critical and better address the purpose of this research. In particular, it is presented how brand management approaches have changed through the years, which models have been developed that provide insight of how those influence the customers and their experiences.

2.2.1. Customer Experience

Many scholars have been identified which are the most important drivers that have an impact on customer satisfaction, concluding in customer experience as a key concept that determines and influences customer satisfaction (Caruana, 2002). Fornell (1992) stated that customer experience and satisfaction have a contributory relationship connection, which means that better customer experience will contribute also positively to customer satisfaction. The most accepted and consensual model by researchers places customer experience as the most important driver of customer satisfaction, which as a result will drive towards customer loyalty, turning finally in customer equity, identified as a main competitive advantage (Parniangtong, 2017; Shankar et al., 2003). Klaus and Maklan (2013) carried a qualitative study to check the different hypothesis, among others one of them was the significant positive impact of customer experience on customer satisfaction. The research confirmed the initial hypothesis, and also confirmed the positive impact of customer experience on customer loyalty and word-of-mouth behaviour.

The concept of customer experience has become more popular during the last decades. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) introduced the concept, postulating that the consumer behaviour can not only be explained with the cognitive value and the price of the products and services, thus, they stated that the consumer behaviour also involves emotions, feelings and sub-consciousness (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Therefore, the subjectivity of customer experience makes it difficult to control and manage by the companies (Verhoef et al., 2009).

Even the growing popularity and importance of customer experience in the marketing literature, due the concept nature and subjectivity that we will explain later in this document, there is a lack of consensus among the researchers on its definition and dimensionality. In order to have a better understanding of the concept, it is needed to check and analyse the evolution of it during the last decades, which definitions are given by the different researchers, and which are the dimensions that they consider that are involved in the customer experience.

When Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) introduced the concept, they conceptualised it with three different categories: Fantasies, feelings and fun. This was the first approach, with the intention to conceptualise it including an emotional and subjective part. Later, Pine and Gilmore (1998) stated that experiences are a concept different from goods and services and that firms can offer and consumers can purchase also an experience, instead of just a product or a service. One year after, Pine and Gilmore (1999), redefine the concept giving four divisions to the consumption experience. They are structured in two main categories, the level of guest participation and the environmental relationship between the customer and the occurrence. In the first dimension, the level of participation can be active or passive, meanwhile, the customer
and occurrence relationship can be absorption or immersion. Schmitt (1999) also defined the customer experience and gave a multidimensional view, identifying five different types of experiences: sensory, affective, cognitive, physical and social identity. Researchers continued focusing on customer experience in the marketing literature, McCarthy and Wright (2004) in their attempt to conceptualise customer experience considering technology as an experience identified four different types of experience: the sensual, the compositional, the emotional and the spatio-temporal. The same year, Poullsson and Kale (2004) in their attempt to conceptualise customer experience, identified the elements required for a successful experience: personal relevance, novelty, surprise, learning and engagement dimensions. Was later, in 2006, when Mascarenhas et al. (2006) stated that the total customer experience includes the physical and emotional dimensions, and more relevant and innovative was that they conceptualise it as customer-dependent and context-specific, which it has been widely confirmed until now. In his attempt to conceptualise customer experience, Fornerino et al. (2006) similarly to Schmitt (1999) identified five dimensions involved during the consuming experience, classified as sensorial-perceptual, physical, affective, cognitive and social. Researchers kept working on the concept of customer experience and continued attempting to give a definition and dimensionality to the concept. Gentile et al. (2007), stated that customer experience is originated from the set of interactions that occur between the customer and the product, service, company or part of the organization and generate a reaction. In addition, Gentile et al. (2007), stated that the experience is strictly individual for each person and requires involvement from part of the customer at different stages during the interactions. Gentile et al. (2007) identified six different dimensions involved in the customer experience, sensorial, cognitive, emotional, lifestyle, pragmatic and relational. Even though, Gentile et al. (2007), did not test empirically the existence or involvement of all the dimensions, which is a limitation and gives less reliability to the conceptualisation. Later, in 2009, Verhoef et al. (2009) defined customer experience as a holistic multidimensional construct that involves cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical dimensions. Verhoef et al. (2009) limited the study in a retailing context. On the other hand, and more recently, Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) redefined the dimensions, cutting it to four elements involved in the customer experience, the sensorial, affective, behavioural and intellectual. Brakus et al. (2009) understand the consumer experience as subjective, in which internal and behavioural responses are involved. More recently, De Keyser et al. (2015, p. 23) attempted to give a definition to customer experience, they stated that customer experience is “comprised of the cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial, spiritual, and social elements that mark the customer’s direct or indirect interaction with (an)other market actor(s)”. As a conclusion, it can be seen through this brief summary that there is no consensus among the researchers. Even though, this lack of consensus, there are also similarities and parts in which most of the scholars and researchers agree, customer experience is multidimensional and involves elements such as cognitive, emotional, sensory, behavioural and social, that generate customer responses to a company’s offer during the purchasing journey (Schmitt, 1999; Fornerino et al., 2006; Verhoef et al., 2009).

Furthermore, customers have a new experience every time they have an interaction with the firm, the product or service, and the interaction could happen through multiple channels and at different points in time, these interactions between the parts are named as touchpoints (Stein,
The number of touchpoints between the customer and the companies is increasing due to the multiple channels and media existing nowadays, which finally results in more complex customer journeys, requiring to focus on customer experience (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). In addition, multiple authors state that there are three stages of touching points in the customer journey, pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. In addition, it is believed that touchpoints happen along all the different stages of the customer journey, the pre-purchase, the purchase and the post-purchase (Stein, 2016). Since companies cannot have under control all the touchpoints and interactions of the customers with the brand, and the touchpoints represent what happens from the customer perspective, for a deep understanding of the whole interaction of the customer with the firm through all the touchpoints of the customer journey it is required a subjective customer perspective (Stein, 2016). Thus, highlights the importance of identifying which are the most important characteristics and dimensions on the touchpoints during the different stages of the customer journey.

As explained before, customer experience is understood as a dynamic process that flows from the pre-purchase stage to the purchase stage and finally to the post-purchase. In addition, the process considers and includes the previous experiences, purchases and external factors, making the process not just dynamic, but also iterative (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). In order to have a better understanding of the total customer journey and how it evolves along the process, the different stages will be briefly introduced. The first stage of the process is the pre-purchase. The pre-purchase stage includes all the aspects of the touching points and interactions between the customer and the brand or company before the purchase transaction is done. Traditionally, marketing literature identified and considered the behaviours involved in the pre-purchase as need recognition, search and consideration. Theoretically, the pre-purchase stage is considered to start with the impulse or need recognition to the consideration of satisfying it with a purchase (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

The second stage of the customer journey process is the purchase stage. This stage is covering the touching points between the customer and the brand during the purchase event. The most important behaviours recognized during the purchase stage are the choice, the ordering and the payment. This stage is characterized for being the shortest one in terms of time of the three stages. This stage typically received high attention from the researchers in the marketing literature, focusing on topics such as marketing activities, environment, atmospherics or service environment influence the customer when making a purchase decision. In addition, research and literature focused on consumer products at the purchase stage and on the shopping experience of the customers, highlighting important concepts to be considered such as purchase confidence, choice overload, or decision satisfaction (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

The third stage of the customer journey process is the post-purchase stage. The post-purchase stage follows the previously explained stage, the purchase. The post-purchase stage identified behaviours are usage and consumption, post-purchase engagement and service requests. Theoretically, the post-purchase stage could be extended from the purchase event to the end of the customer’s life. However, practically, that stage consider and includes the aspects of the
customer experience after the purchasing event and that are related to the brand, company, product or service. The product or service becomes the most important touchpoint during the post-purchase stage. Scholars, research and literature about this stage have been focusing on concepts such as consumption experience, service recovery, decisions to return products, repurchase, seek variety, word of mouth and customer engagement (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Recent research about customer experience stated that the process of the customer journey includes the “loyalty loop” (Court et al., 2009). That means that during the post-purchase stage, customer loyalty may occur, leading to a repurchase or further involvement with the brand or company. This fact would result at the beginning of a new process, moving back the customer to the pre-purchase stage. Once identified the different stages of the customer journey and the important concepts involved in each one, becomes highly important for the brands to understand both perspectives, the firm and the customer perspective of the customer journey. Firms should identify which touch elements of each stage are under their control and which ones are not, to consider them on their management strategy with the aim to lead customers to continue the relationship and the customer journey with the brand (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

In addition, along the customer journey, there are different types of touchpoints that can be identified. It has been identified four categories to classify the touchpoints along the customer process: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned and social or external touchpoints. It is possible to identify these categories in each of the customer process stages explained above, pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase. However, depending on the nature of the context, the product, the service or the customer own journey, the importance of each category in each stage change (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

With regards to the touchpoints or interactions that are designed, managed and under the brand’s control are identified as brand-owned touchpoints. This includes touchpoints related to brand-owned media or brand marketing elements, such as advertising, promotion, packaging, price, service or product attributes. It is believed that brand-owned touchpoints can influence customer attitudes and can contribute to customer loyalty. Since these touchpoints are under the firm’s control and can lead to positive results, firm’s need to pay considerable attention when managing them to take the maximum advantage, that will result in profit (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

The second category refers to the touchpoints that are designed, managed or controlled by the brand and one or more partners, and are known as partner-owned touchpoints. Different types of partners can be marketing agencies, loyalty program partners, communication channel partners or multichannel distribution partners. The effects or influence of the partner-owned touchpoints on customer attitudes or customer loyalty are not as clear as brand-owned touchpoints.

Another identified category is customer-owned touchpoints and refers to the points that are part of the customer experience but that are not influenced, managed or controlled by the firm or its partners. Brands cannot control customers’ needs or desires during the pre-purchase stage or
control the choice of the customers when choosing a payment method in the purchase stage, they are customer-owned touchpoints. Customer-owned touchpoints are more prevalent in the post-purchase stage when the customer is consuming and the usage of the product or the service takes the scope of attention. However, recent studies identified that the co-creation of value between the customers and firms can increase the importance of this touching points during the pre-purchase stage (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

The fourth category is the social or external touchpoints. This category includes the touchpoints in which others can influence the customer experience, such as other customers, peer influences, environments or independent information sources. These touchpoints can occur and influence the customer decision and experience along the three stages of the customer journey and could affect and influence customers even more than other touchpoints controlled by the brand, such as marketing or advertisement (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

This model of the process that includes the different stages of the customer journey and the variety of touchpoints that could influence the customer experience, becomes highly important for the companies since it can provide a framework of the touchpoints along the journey that are more important and that are or not under their control. Once identified the touchpoints along the customer journey process, companies can manage and try to influence the customer experience with the aim to improve it and gain competitive advantage (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Figure 2. Process model for customer journey and experience, as conceptualized by Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p.77)
2.2.2. Brand Management panorama

Since the brand and the importance of the brand, the value of brand equity for businesses and the relationship with customers and their experiences with the brand is a central aspect in this thesis work, as previously addressed in this paper, it is believed that an outline of the existing marketing research in the field of brand management is needed to better understand which concept and theoretical frameworks have been delivered by researchers that will be most appropriate to address our scope. In addition, it is important to underline that the different published brand management frameworks aim to give guidance on how to build a strong brand, focusing on many different scientific traditions such as economics, strategic management, organizational behaviour, consumer research, psychology and so on as described by Heding et al. (2009). However, the perspective taken when analysing the different brand approaches is not very alike the traditional way, meaning getting guidance and insight on how to build, manage and measure the performance of a brand, but it is to discover which dimension, building blocks and such of a brand, which is directly connected with the product and/or service of a business, are important to deliver positive thoughts, feelings, image, beliefs, perception, opinion that could enhance customer experience. Hence, to conceptualise the different approaches and to evaluate which will be the most appropriate to our purpose the overview presented in the book written by Heding et al. (2009) will be used. Further, the approaches that are most pertinent to this thesis scope will be further analysed to get an insight of which are the most important dimensions regarding brand management theories that are affecting customer and their experiences.

The researchers then evaluate two paradigms, seven different approaches in marketing research and three periods of times in the last thirty years of brand management history, as shown in Fig.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two paradigms</th>
<th>Three periods of time</th>
<th>Seven brand approaches</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivistic</td>
<td>Company/sender focus</td>
<td>The economic approach</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The identity approach</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human/receiver focus</td>
<td>The consumer-based approach</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Constructivist</td>
<td>The personality approach</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural/context focus</td>
<td>The relational approach</td>
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<td>The community approach</td>
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<td>The cultural approach</td>
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Figure 3. Overview of brand management 1985 - 2006 in marketing research, as studied by Heding et al. (2009, p.26)

The evolution of brand management approaches is due to the effort from the researchers on trying to mitigate the weaknesses of the other approaches that are all, according to Heding et
al. (2009), interconnected in some ways. Hence, this evolution of brand management theories is seen as the mutation in environmental, societal, and strategic business drivers that had made some approaches more relevant than others. They continue arguing that the field in study had experienced two predominant paradigms, positivistic first and constructivist or interpretive after. In a nutshell the former “implies a notion of the brand being ‘owned’ by the marketer, who controls the communication to a passive recipient/consumer” (Heding et al., 2009, p.21) and the brand equity is created by the marketer and is “manipulable lifeless artefact (product plus that it is created by its owners/managers and that can be positioned, segmented and used to create an image)” (Hanby 1999, p. 12). The latter reflects on the value of and the nature of the brand, and the brand equity is something created when an active synergy, communication and such is experienced between marketer and consumer. Thus, there is a switch from company/sender focus, the business behind the brand, to human/receiver focus, the receiver meaning that the consumer is the main point of interest giving a human perspective of the brand, and to a final cultural/context focus where the contextual and cultural forces are behind branding choices (Heding et al., 2009).

- The economic approach

This approach describes the first proposal to brand management, explaining the foundation for how the brands have been managed and are managed. The evolution through the years of this approach has brought brand managers to adopt the “Four Ps” from marketing research in exploring how the different factors in the marketing mix affect consumers’ brand choice. As briefly said before this approach keeps the business behind the brand and the assumption of this approach are based on the Adam Smith (1723-1790) “invisible hands” school of thought in the way of how market forces allocate resources most efficiently. Here the “customer is assumed to be able to make rationally based brand consumption choices and to be focused on utility maximization, which is why they will always choose whatever brand delivers the best utility value compared with the price” (Heding et al., 2009, p.34). Hence, the exchange of information between customer and businesses is seen as a stand-alone transaction rather than an ongoing relationship.

However, many critics to this approach have been raised. The first is that using the marketing mix as the primary approach to manage brands could results in only short-term advantages because the focus is mainly been given on the next transaction between consumers and businesses. In addition, the approach has been largely criticized since its theoretical framework is a result of theorization rather than empirical research. Thus, not addressing the consumer as the primary focus of analysis. (Heding et al., 2009).

Lastly, even if the marketing mix and how it affects consumer brand choices and behaviour is still widely used in the implementation of brand strategies, it has been recognized not to be an approach that will be used in this thesis work since it is not centred on customer and is felt will not provide to this research insight of which dimension, building blocks and such of a brand are crucial to enhance customer experience.
• The identity approach

The identity approach concludes that in order to build a strong brand, beforehand a strong, consistent and coherent brand identity needs to be established for brand value and brand equity creation (Heding et al., 2009). The brand identity is then fundamental to let the businesses outline who they are and hence, to communicate it to the different stakeholders. Furthermore, the approach, as presented in the work done by Schultz et al. (2000), has been developed in order to explain what are the building blocks that define the brand identity, namely organizational identity, corporate identity, image and reputation. In here two of those cover internal aspect and the other two external aspects. In addition, the crucial aspect of the identity approach is to align the above-mentioned building blocks as underlined by the creation of the AC2ID framework developed by Balmer and Greyser (2003).

However, as reported by Heding et al. (2009) this model has been criticized because lacks relevance for both consumers and the other stakeholders. Furthermore, the approach misses to explain whether or not all the type of organization and their structure could suit the aim of brand identity. Thus, not having a holistic approach to the brand management field.

For all these considerations, because the primary focus of the identity approach is the brand in an organizational perspective and for a different focus that this thesis work aims to give, this approach will not be considered further in the analysis, since it is felt that a much more customer-centred approach should be instead further analysed.

• The personality approach

The approach consists of three supporting themes which build the theoretical framework, namely personality, expression of self and congruence between brand personality and consumer self. The personality accounts for concept deriving from human psychology in the way of characterizing the main personalities that human beings can be relatively categorized. Expression of self-outline how the customer consumes and select brands based on their capability to contribute in building and express themselves. Finally, the construct of brand–self congruence describes the process of identification between the brand personality and the consumer personality establishing that much more the congruence those personalities will have, more chance of succeeding the brand and in it its personality will have. In addition to that, an application of this approach is done by Aaker (1997). He develops the framework called ‘Dimensions of brand personality’ where he explains that the dimensions of brand personality are five and continue saying how these dimensions can be expressed in the communication of a brand personality by emphasizing certain traits or behaviours.

Even if this approach puts the consumer as a central aspect and show how personality could make a difference to build a strong brand, it is felt that, it focuses mainly on how human
personality and customer identity, as well as expression, builds brand equity, overlooking at other brand building blocks more in line with the scope of this paper. Thus, letting us think that focusing on a broader aspect rather than the brand and consumers personality will provide a better fit to the purpose of this thesis.

- The cultural approach

The cultural approach is based on the analysis of brands and branding in the newcomer perspective of cultural influences. In fact, this approach emphasizes the cultural forces in society and how this force could be used to establish an iconic brand as well as which impact have brand practices on culture and marketplace (Heding et al., 2009). The focus of analysis in this approach moves from an individual consumer level to a macro level in which brands play a role for consumer cultures. In here, the successful brands are the ones that were able to be integrated into cultures better than others. Thus, the brand has a cultural meaning that plays an active role in consumer culture. In addition, the cultural approach explains the mechanisms on why brands becoming icons and at the same time, the approach also relates to a consumer culture which is increasingly concerned with the branded products, pressuring for changes in the way brands behave and act. The core theme of this approach is the cultural consumption theory, cultural branding theory. Thus, the cultural approach has its model closely related to McCracken’s theory of cultural consumption and the theory of cultural branding as developed through the years by Holt (Heding et al., 2009).

All being said, for the sake of this thesis and for the nature of the research around this approach it is felt that further analysis will not be pursued, even though it is recognizing the importance that culture plays when we are in search of building a strong and iconic brand. It has been briefly provided different approaches to brand management in order to build a strong brand and indication of how this concept will not be relevant for the purpose of the thesis. It has been left out the brief presentation of the three approaches that are intended to further analyse later in these pages in order to avoid unnecessary repetition. In addition, for a better understanding of customer experience from the brand management field point of view a deep analysis of all the seven approaches would be the best, however for time and length constraint, it has been decided not to do so. In fact, the analysis above has been done to make the reader acquainted with both what it has been done in this field and why it has been decided not to focus on the few approaches presented.

Furthermore, the choice of three specific approaches, consumer-based, relational and community, is supported, apart from the thesis scope, beliefs of the researchers and other reasons that will be presented later in these pages, by the five dimensions that constitute customers’ mindset namely, awareness, associations, attitudes, attachments and activity (Keller and Lehmann 2003). The first three can be found in the consumer-based approach, the fourth in the relational approach and the fifth in the community approach. As said, the three relevant approaches, the motivations behind focusing only on them and the limitations that come with them will be addressed in the next chapter.
Lastly, it is important to underline once again that the approach that will be taken when further analyse those three approaches will be in order to find concept, building blocks and such that will provide useful insight about customers and their experiences towards a brand, its service and product and direct to some extent the interviews’ questions that will be presented at a later stage.

2.2.3 The consumer-based approach

In this approach to brand management, compared to the others analysed previously in this text, the consumer has become the main point of interest, “owning”, as reported by Keller (1993), the brand. The brand value creation is something that resides in the association held in the customers’ minds. Hence, for Keller (2001) understanding the consumers, creating the right type of experiences with product and service together with the right businesses marketing programs is the key to build a strong brand. Said that, this approach will be looked with a different “eye” compared to the canonical way of using the model presented by Keller (2001). In fact, we are not in search of guidelines to follow in order to build a strong brand, but we are in search of what the most valuable and influencing framework in the field of brand management have to say about customer experience and how the brand and its characteristics are affecting it.

The central theme of this approach is that it is possible to understand, measure, and manage brands by understanding what consumers feel, think, and most of all know about brands Heding et al. (2009). Consumer brand knowledge includes brand awareness and brand image. The first relates to a wide variety of brand associations, such as product attributes, features, benefits, personality, country of origin, and other secondary associations. These components build brand equity. Thus, Keller (1993) state that brand equity arises from strong, favourable, and unique brand associations capable of delivering the right type of experiences with the product and services that the brand represents. Thus, he recognizes that the challenge for marketers is to create the right type of experience with their product and services which are directly connected with the brand so that “the desired thoughts, feelings, images, beliefs, perceptions, opinions, and so on become linked to the brand” (Keller, 2001, p3). As a consequence, to understand brand knowledge the model called customer-based brand equity, known as well as the CBBE model, was created.

The CBBE model by Keller (1993), is a sequence of steps where each step depends on the effective and successful accomplishment of previous steps. In order to progress between one step and another certain objective with customers need to be accomplished. In addition, the combination of the four steps, the building blocks of the brand and the relative sub-dimension as presented in the model can be seen as tools that will ensure a positive/negative connection in the mind of the customer and shape in a positive/negative way the consumers’ experiences with product and services connected to the brand. In addition, those dimensions will help marketers to shape thoughts, feelings, beliefs, perception and make it linked with the brand.
Below it is possible to see in a schematic way the different stages, blocks a sub-dimension of the CBBE model as presented by Keller.

![Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid](image1)

**Figure 4, Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid, as conceptualized by Keller (2001, p.7).**

![Subdimensions of Brand-Building Blocks](image2)

**Figure 5, Subdimensions of Brand-Building Blocks, as conceptualized by Keller (2001, p.8).**

Following will be only presented aspects of the building blocks found in the CBBE model that it is believed could influence the customer experience.

- **Brand Salience & Awareness**

Brand salience relates to awareness aspects of the brand. In other words, brand awareness is how easily the brand is recalled and recognized by the customers, higher the association of a brand to a specific service product higher will be the customers’ ability to recall and recognize a brand, hence higher brand awareness. The brand awareness involves linking certain type of association that reside in the memory of the consumer, brand logo, name, symbol and such. Hence, to have high brand awareness, marketers need to make sure that in the memory of the customers the product or service associated with the brand is also associated with the need that the brand is designed to deliver. In addition, to have a salient brand does not only mean how easily customers can recall or recognize the brand but as well the breadth of brand awareness meaning the purchase and consumption settings in which the brand comes to mind. (Keller, 2013). More a consumer experiences the brand by seeing it, hearing it, or thinking about it, the more likely the brand will be registered in its mind. Then this role, of how often the consumer
experiences the brand, is covered by one of the brand’s elements such as its logo, name, packaging, slogan and even how it is marketed, advertised, promoted, accounting then for present and past experiences that customers have had with the brand.

- Brand Meaning & Image

Brand meaning accounts to have and establish a brand image. The goal of having a strong image is that the consumers will have a positive, strong and favourable feeling when thinking about a brand, enhancing directly their experiences. The association with the brand image and thus with brand meaning can come from different sources such as typical functional performance-related, abstract imaginary-related association. Consequently, according to Keller (2001) (2013), brand meaning is constituted by two major categories, performance and imagery, which could directly coming from the consumers’ own experience with the brand or indirectly such as advertising, word-of-mouth, online surfing information, consumers report, channel of distribution cultural and context influences. However, the most influential source of information depends mostly on the type of product and services in analysis.

The five performance-related attributes’ categories are to some extent influencing how consumers perceive the brand, its products and services and eventually their experiences.

1. **Price.** Price policies still one of the most important characteristics of a brand that can create an association in consumers’ minds and drive their decision and affect their experiences.

2. **Primary characteristics and secondary features.** Customers can have beliefs and prioritize a brand to another based on the experiences they had with primary or secondary features that the product holds. Some could be essential features that make the product works others are features that make the product customizable and more suitable for consumers’ preferences.

3. **Product reliability, durability, and serviceability.** Those attributes are crucial to some category of service and/or products. The first tells the consistency of performance over time and from purchase to purchase. The second relates to the expected economic life of the product and the third on how easy is to repair the product if needed. Hence these three aspects involve speed, accuracy, courtesy, helpfulness in customer treatment and service, which affects dramatically customer perception, association and experiences held in their minds.

4. **Service effectiveness, efficiency, and empathy.** Those other three are related to how well the brand satisfies customers’ service requirements, the brand responsiveness to service call and if the brand is seen as trustworthy and careful towards customers’ interest.
5. **Style and design.** Those are in regard to associations that go beyond functional aspects. In fact, aesthetic features such as shape, size, colour and such or how the product looks, feels or smells can create favourable associations in the mind of customers towards a brand and could enhance customers’ experiences.

In addition, Keller (2013) evaluates four imaginary-related association, in other words, four main types of intangible aspects of the brand that are categorized in a more abstract level compared to the previous one.

1. **User profile.** Imagery association can derive from the type of person or organization that uses the brand. In fact, some brands can be idealized in relation to the brand user on demographics (gender, age) factors or on more abstract factors like psychographic factor (personal behaviour, social related issue).

2. **Purchase and usage situations.** Association can derive from where the brand could or should be bought. In fact, positive/negative association and experiences can be connected with the type of channel, store and the ease of the purchase connected with the brand. If in the mind of the consumers the brand is associated with a purchase and usage situation (time of the day, week, month) connecting it with a positive/negative association the experience will be as a consequence be affected in the same way.

3. **Personality and values.** Association in the mind of the consumers can be driven by a brand that takes values and personality similar to the people that are using it. Brand personality can drive, sincerity, honesty, excitement, and be successful, reliable, sophisticated, unique and such that could enhance the user experience if the same type of associations, feelings, thoughts are evoked by the brand.

4. **History, heritage, and experiences.** Association with a brand include personal experiences and episodes that can be connected to past behaviour and experiences of friends, family and other individuals. Thus, brands may rely on association with their past and events and history to establish meaning in the mind of a certain category of consumers.

- **Brand Responses**

For Keller (2001, p13) brand responses is what “consumers think and feel about the brand...in response to marketing activities and other sources of information”. The responses are due to brand judgement and feeling. The former is substantially consumers’ personal opinions and evaluation of the brand due to their direct and indirect experiences with it.

Keller (2013) evaluates four types of brand judgment and present them in order of importance, that eventually will enhance the consumer experience with the brand. Those are brand quality,
credibility, consideration and superiority. The first is the attitude that relates to the perceived overall quality of the brand. The second takes a broader view on aspects like brand seen as competent, innovative and market leader namely brand expertise, brand as sensitive to customer interest namely brand trustworthiness and brand as fun interesting and worthwhile namely brand likability. The third relates on how relevant and personal the customers consider the brand in the act of buying and using it, which is driven by a strong brand image that resides in the association in the consumers’ minds and it is due to experiences, emotions and such. Lastly, superiority is possibly the most important of all since addresses to which extent consumers see the brand as unique compared to the others.

For the brand feeling, Keller (2001) identifies six important feelings that if evoked by the brand will ensure to deliver a positive experience to the consumers. Warmth, making consumers feel a sense of calm and peacefulness. Fun, evoke joy, amusement and such. Excitement, making customers feel special, cool energized. Security relates to the sensation of self-assurance, elimination of worries and safety. Social approval, when the brand makes feel the customers proud of owning that brand and make them be seen accepted by society. Self-respect rises the feeling of self-esteem, pride and fulfilment.

- Limitations and Implications

The model presented above, however, comes with its limitations, implications and critiques. In fact, as reported by Heding et al. (2009, p.86), since “it is assumed that the brand is a cognitive construal residing in the mind of the consumer” the human is seen just like a computer in the way that the marketer is able to program and to map out the brand in the mind of the consumer easily. This, in reality, is contradicting other researchers (Heding et al., 2009) that had instead conceptualised the human as an irrational being that keeps an unpredictable and chaotic behaviour, making difficult to let their mind programmed and mapped.

Ultimately, marketers when following this approach should implement effective and efficient marketing programs in accordance with the models since this will affect how consumers will respond.

For our point of view it has been seen that creating brand knowledge in the mind of the consumers could enhance their experience towards a brand product and service. In fact, it has been seen that brand identities can elicit positive experience and judgement in the mind of the consumer. However, as recognized by Keller (2001), the most important brand identities depend pretty much on the context since in different contexts different brand identities enhance and affect more/less in a positive/negative way the experience of the consumers towards a brand, its products and services.
2.2.4. The relational approach

Relationships take place between human beings and since people tend to endow companies with a brand with human-like personalities, the characteristic of a relationship can be applied to those brands as well. Thus, brands able to recall this type of association in what the consumer feels and thinks could enhance favourable beliefs towards the brand itself and boost positive experiences (Heding et al. 2009). Furthermore, the importance of further analyses this approach is due to the direct connection with one of the dimensions that, according to Keller and Lehmann (2003), let to understand customers’ mindset, namely ‘attachment’, which resemble concept that resides in the relational approach.

In this approach, the exchange between consumers and the brand is conceptualized as a process that recalls a human relationship. In here the perspective taken is in the hepatization of the consumers in aspects that goes beyond and are not directly related to an actual consumption choice or behaviour (Heding et al. 2009). The building block consists of principally in the relationship theory as presented by Fournier (1998). Relationships are embedded in everyday actions with other people, and in order to exist an active interaction between the two parts ought to occur. Furthermore, Fournier (1998) continues saying that human relationships take place on different forms and levels in human life so does brand relationship. Hence, coming from empirical studies on how consumers experience relationships with brands, fifteen brand relationships are identified, which however will not be discussed but only shown as Appendix 2, Fig. 6 in the appendix.

In addition to that, Fournier (1998) underlines that relationships, in order to last, need to be of high quality. Thus, he evaluates that there are six important relationship factors namely love/passion, self-connection, commitment, interdependence, intimacy and brand partner quality that play a role in influencing the durability, experience and quality of the relationship. However, the relationship between customer and brand are in a constant state of change, change determined by contextual alteration experienced over time.

• Limitation and Implication

Limitations and challenges do exist in this approach. One of it has been recognized (Heding et al., 2009) in the difficulty to transform the characteristics of the relational approach into managerial implications that are compatible with real-life situations. The literature behind this approach does not provide valuable guidance when managing a brand and relationship marketing is powerful in theory but arise trouble in practice (Fournier, 1998). In addition, since the relationship process is very dynamic, this implies that marketers have a real and deep insight of the customer which require a thorough understanding of the context, making this approach arduous in reality and risky since the marketer will have to deal with a huge amount of knowledge difficult to be coded. In addition, it is not enough for a brand management perspective since it is insufficient as addressed by Heding (2009, p.165), “what kind of relationship consumers experience with brands” needs to be supplemented by research into how brand personality and relationship norms influence consumers’ brand evaluations among
other aspects, such as context and culture. However, for the purpose of this thesis, this approach has given useful insight about the role that real-life relationship has upon a brand and how this could possibly affect the overall experience of consumers when brands tend to establish characteristics that resemble a human-like relationship.

2.2.5. The community approach

Customers form communities around a brand and in these communities, the brand is the main point of social interaction. Hence, the communities are used to share their brand experiences. Brand communities can be both evolve naturally between consumers or being facilitated by the marketers, however, both forms are seen very powerful and thrive powerful forces that affect brand value and its equity. In addition, brand communities can be crucial to brand loyalty. (Heding et al., 2009). The conceptualization of brand communities in the context of brand management was done by Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001). Further, it is really important to talk about communities in the brand panorama since “the brand communities are social entities that reflect the situated embeddedness of brands in the day-to-day lives of consumers and the ways in which brands connect consumer to brand, and consumer to consumer’ (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 418), hence the existence of a brand community also requires interaction between consumer.

This brief introduction highlights the necessity to further analyse what brand community is in order to possibly discover how those communities around the brand affect consumers experiences. Thus, acknowledging that in recent years communities have grown big and became very influential in brand meaning, value and how they affect customer experience is a crucial step when evaluating what it is affecting customer experience. In addition, since later in this thesis work is intended to approach online communities, forums and such to get useful context insight, it is believed that a pre-evaluation about what brand communities are and how they affect the interaction, namely the experiences, between consumer and brand is needed.

The core theme of this approach is the brand community. The approach sets the exchange of information to a different level of the ones presented previously in these pages. In fact, it is experienced that the exchange of information is not only between the brand and the consumers but as well, and most importantly, between consumers themselves. In addition, as reported by Heding et al. (2009), the community approach adds concepts and meaning that reside in the social interaction between the different stakeholders. He continues saying that brand management research has been approached perceiving the man as a socio-cultural entity rather than an individualistic customer-oriented entity. Thus, the methodological orientation of this approach emphasizes the necessity of focusing on ethnography research in order to emphasize a real-world situation and how consumers act in this socio-cultural environment. Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) historically were one of the first researchers attempting this study. They proved the existence of brand communities defining them as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand’ (2001, p. 421).
Furthermore, Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) recognized that brand communities exist in both face-to-face and virtual environments such as clubs and online based forums. Thus, a brand community is not restricted geographically like the traditional perception of community, instead it is a physical or intangible place where consumers share a mutual identity. The conceptualization of the community approach resides in three different markers of community, namely ‘consciousness of kind’, the ‘shared rituals and traditions’ and ‘sense of moral responsibility’. The first marker ‘consciousness of kind’ suggests that “members feel an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, they feel a stronger connection toward one another. Members feel that they sort of know each other at some level, even if they have never met. (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 418). The second marker ‘shared rituals and traditions’ indicates that the communities usually put an emphasis on shared consumption experiences with product and services connected to a brand. Thus, communities’ members share their experiences and thoughts about the brand in a sort of codified language that makes them feel even more attached to another as well as to the brand (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). The third marker ‘sense of moral responsibility’, makes the members to have a sense of duty to the community and accounts for “having procedures and collective action that contributes to group cohesion” (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 424). On top, the community are built on a moral system that can be subtle and highly dependent on the context in exam.

Other researchers (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002), however, extend the concept of brand communities. In fact, in a marketplace setting situation, communities are a crucial place where people nowadays share their experience that can be based on a cognitive, emotional and material level. In addition to that, they argue that brand communities are seen as a social aggregation of brand users and add the relational aspect that these communities form not only with the brand but among the communities’ members. Thus, customers also value their relationship with their brand possession and share them collectively in such environment.

- Limitation and Implication

According to Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 427) “a brand with a powerful sense of community would generally have greater value to a marketer than a brand with a weak sense of community. However, it should also be recognized that a strong brand community can be a threat to a marketer should a community collectively reject marketing efforts or product change, and then use communal communications channels to disseminate this rejection.” giving indication on how powerful community consumer can be for a managerial perspective and source of great brand loyalty. In addition to that, managers can benefit from a community by observing those communities in order to extract brand value as perceived by the consumers. Hence, the community can facilitate the sharing of consumption experiences between consumers. On the other hand, communities are difficult to manage, according to (Wipperfürth 2005) since they could be able to ‘hijack’ a brand, recognising the power residing in them.

Besides, as briefly said in this text, communities are an important provider of information for both marketers and consumers. Heding et al. (2009, p.184) continue arguing that “Brand management from the community approach perspective is complex, and the autonomous
groups of consumers can be hard to deal with. But the levels of brand loyalty and the depths of brand meaning found in communities can be priceless, making it worthwhile knowing the basic mechanisms ruling this approach”, making it once again very relevant in the current market panorama since the brand-consumer exchange is done between countless number of consumer able to share good and bad experiences, their beliefs and spreading rumours faster with current communication technology.
3. Methodology

This chapter provides the choice of the research strategy and method that it is believed to be appropriate for the investigation. Here we also outlined the profiles of the people appearing in the study as well as a description of the procedure of data collection. In addition, quality and ethical considerations are outlined.

3.1. Research Strategy & Method

The empirical data for this project is collected by conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews with experts on customer experience, brand management and people that work in the kitchen appliances context. In addition to that, it has been decided to rely on an online forum to get secondary empirical data when collecting the perspective of consumers about what it is most important when considering kitchen appliances. This is due to the fact of being a less time-consuming practice and to reach a wider number of consumers compared to a face to face interview. Said that, it is acknowledge that for instance face to face semi-structured interview as well as quantitative questionnaires and such with consumers, and not only with expert, could have given more detailed answers. However, due to the time constraint and the uncertainty of interviewing relevant consumers, it has been decided to rely on an online forum community that was established to discuss articles, give product recommendations as well as provide polls, discussions and blogs raised by the subscribers to share thoughts about the home environment, and kitchen appliances. In relation to that last aspect, the initial intended approach of the researcher was to conduct a quantitative data collection. For instance, creation of quantitative questionnaires and/or surveys, seeking to generate primary data from customer/consumer point of view, was believed to be the most comprehensive solution to tackle this part of data gathering, making the research, to some extent more reliable. Nonetheless, as previously said, time constraint has convinced the researchers not to pursue this strategy. A strategy which is suggested to be followed by other researchers when further studies about the research topic are done and have among other aspects higher availability in terms of resources compared to this study. All being said, the findings are juxtaposed with the literature review to drive an analysis and finally present a discussion where the research questions will be answered.

All the interviews were performed via Skype since the participants work and live in different locations around Europe. Advantages of conducting a Skype interview reside in the way how this platform encourages interviewees who have time and place limitations for face-to-face interviews to participate in research, as per this research. In addition, the platform had given the possibility to the researchers to reach, theoretically, expert all over the world that best would have been able to address the different interviews questions, as well as allowed to mitigate the constraint of availability of resources in terms of time, finance and physical mobility. On the other end, conducting Skype interviews could to some extent not fully engage the respondents, thus limiting their thoughts and beliefs about the different questions. Although this was not experienced in the different interviews, it is believed it is an aspect that needs to be considered when this methodology is conducted. Further, Skype interviews are considered to be face to
face interviews allowing for the creation of a trustworthy environment and familiarity for the interviewed people. Thus, as addressed by Bryman and Bell (2011) the participants will be more willing to have a conversation and open up to eventually produce the best responses. In addition, all the interviews were done in English, to avoid any mistake when a translation was needed and also for validity reasons. The interviews were phone recorded and later transcribed, which according to Bryman and Bell (2011) it is a good modus operandi as it grants the identification of key points. On top, notes were taken during the interview to grasp aspects that could go lost when the transcription takes place. In addition, according to Saunders’s (2009), in semi-structured interviews, the researchers have a list of themes and questions to be addressed, as in our case. Semi-structured interviews allow, depending on the counterparty in question, slight changes in the structure of the interview during the interview. (Saunders et al. 2009). The themes and questions for the semi-structured interview in this study were built based on the theoretical conceptualization done in the literature review and regarding customer experience, brand characteristics and such. Examining how the attributes are perceived from different perspectives depending on the interviewed subject. In addition, the questions presented to the interviewed subjects are the same in order to establish the starting point of the semi-structured interview. The interview guide is reported in appendix 1 at the end of this thesis, to let the reader get a general idea of the type of questions asked to the interviewees.

To gather secondary empirical data, we relied on Houzz (2019) an online community website where people exchange opinion about everything that goes around the home environment, from appliances to furniture, and where people naturally create forums with topics that address what it is in search in this thesis. For instance, a found topic was “What is most important when buying kitchen appliances?”, that will help to conduct the analysis and complement the customer perspective about the thesis topic. Said that, the internet is a powerful tool full of this type of website however, sometimes, the choice of which is the best source of information to drive valuable consideration is overwhelming. We were in search of discussion around kitchen appliances and this online website which is grouping in an effective and less time-consuming way information was according to us the best fit for our research. However, the question could slightly change depending on the counterpart in exam and depending on both where the natural flow of the interview is bringing both parties and in order to get the most relevant information in which the interviewed subject is an expert as reported by Saunders et al. (2009). Besides, according to Bryman and Bell (2011) question may not follow on exactly in the way they were outlined leaving, to some extent, room for the interviewee to free address the themes. Thus, the semi-structured interviews will be the best choice according to what we want to achieve since we intended to explore a fairly clear topic rather a very general notion so that the more specific issues can be addressed. In addition, the choice of conducting semi-structured interviews will be useful when analysing the data as addressed by Bryman and Bell (2011), in fact, more structured interviews are useful to better direct the research in a later stage to conduct his analysis.

The research is an exploratory one since it is intended to explore the research question and the themes around it, not intending to offer a final and conclusive solution to the existing problem. Generically, exploratory research design does not aim to deliver any final and conclusive
answer but focuses mostly to explore the research topic with different level of depth which depends on what the researchers want to achieve (Saunders et al., 2009). In addition, Saunders et al. (2009) recognize that this approach could help the researchers, among other advantages, to have a better understanding of the problem and leaves them with the opportunity to slightly change the direction of the research as new data, insight, participants are brought in during the process. Another advantage in conducting such type of research resides in its effectiveness in laying the groundwork that could lead to further analysis on the same or similar topic. On the other hand, exploratory studies that generate qualitative data, are subjected to bias when interpreting the various information. In addition, this type of study usually makes use of a limited number of samples that may not adequately represent the target population; accordingly, findings are difficult to be generalized to a wider population which is something that intrinsically resides in most if not all qualitative research.

Furthermore, using qualitative techniques in opposition to quantitative ones could both rise advantage and disadvantage. Since we are dealing with customer experiences something that relates to feeling, thoughts, personal experience, beliefs, and such it is intended to put the focus onto the interviewees’ point of view and see what the consumer and the expert in the field have to say in such industry context, which could be done to a larger extent if a qualitative approach is chosen over a quantitative one. (Bryman and Bell, 2011). In addition, it is believed that if a quantitative approach would have been used the expert belief, thoughts and point of view would have gone missing, which is on the other hand in those aspects are seen as very important when dealing with our type of research approach and scope.

Said that, however, drawbacks of qualitative research are that it is more difficult to generalize a usually smaller sample of interviewed people that comes generically with qualitative research compare to the quantitative statistical approach that it is more adequate to address the generalizability issue. On top, it is felt the difficulty to define the concept of experience when researching with a quantitative approach, which as opposite, with a qualitative approach important aspect related to experience could rise when liberty of expression to the interviewee it is given, thus qualitative techniques like interviews would be the best approach in relation to that.

3.2. Research Approach

The thesis takes an abductive approach, where empirical findings with the theoretical framework interact in synergy (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Since we are not testing any theory as per a purely deductive approach and we are not generating any new theory in order to enhance or disprove another one as per an inductive approach, but rather, we are bringing into analysis theories and conceptual models with empirical data, we consider our approach abductive. The different approaches to the brand management field and to marketing customer-centric concept constitute the base and the theoretical starting point of this study. However, the approach might echo the concept of theory-testing as we partly check which of the product, services characteristics and brand identities, found in the literature review, are critical in the specific context, but it is believed that this will not be a purely deductive approach.
3.3. Data Analysis

According to Miles et al. (1994), the process of analysing qualitative data concentrate on data in forms of words. Thus, processing of these words is an aspect of the analysis procedure. The procedure consists of three activities:

- Data reduction is viewed as the process of selecting simplifying and transforming the data in an arranged way and evaluate core themes to better proceed with the analysis.

- Data display accounts to the presentation of reduced data in an organised way in order to simplify the process of drawing conclusions.

- Conclusion drawing is the ultimate analytical where the researcher evaluates the significance of the finding by noting regularities, explanations, patterns casual flows and proposition.

Furthermore, content analysis was used. Qualitative content analysis is one of the numerous research methods used to analyse text data. Other methods include ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, and historical research and so on. (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The data will be collected with multiple semi-structured interviews. According to Downe-Wamboldt (1992), the goal of the content analysis is to provide knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon, concepts and such that are under study. Thus, it is believed that for the explorative nature of the thesis and to discover core themes this type of analysis was the best choice. For instance, grounded theory was not a methodology suitable for us since is not aimed to create any theory from the empirical data but rather explore the content of the empirical data. Specifically, we used direct content analysis which as major differences among the other two content analysis namely conventional and summative is the coding schemes, origins of codes, and threats to trustworthiness. Content analysis using a directed approach is guided by a more structured process than in the other two approaches (Hickey & Kipping, 1996). In fact, in our case, the literature reviewed is the base for our initial codes. Codes that can evolve when the data will be further analysed.

The structure is guided by the topics addressed in the literature review. This is due to explore what empirically the persons interviewed (CRM expert, Brand expert, Consultant and such), and the secondary empirical data have to say about the topics in exam and to drive the reader with an easy to understand structure. The structure and the core themes have been changed throughout the thesis since a new inherent theme had appeared during the semi-structured interviews. In addition, the overall structure will naturally follow the approach kept during the whole thesis work.

Finally, in the process, we have cross analysed the different interviews when they talk about the same theme in order to compare them and juxtapose this knowledge with the theoretical framework of the thesis in order to directly address the research questions.
3.4. Sampling & Profile of respondents

It has been chosen to employ non-probabilistic sampling approach for a set of reasons, among which time and budget limitations of the research, aiming to build a representative case that best addresses the scope and aim of the thesis. In addition, the non-probabilistic sampling method chosen was a purposive sampling that according to Saunders et al. (2009) it occurs when elements selected for the sample are chosen by the judgment of the researcher. Further, Saunders et al. (2009) continue saying that in purposive sampling personal judgment needs to be used to choose subjects that help answer research questions and/or achieve research objectives. In fact, the sample chosen in the thesis were selected according to what this exploratory study wanted to achieve and to answer the research questions and will be further presented later in this section. The purpose of choosing those subjects was due to get insight from different perspectives about the topic addressed in the thesis namely customer experience, brands management both generically and in the specific context.

Furthermore, Saunders et al. (2009) evaluate the advantages of having a purposive non-probabilistic sampling in line with what was experienced in this thesis, in fact such approach is cost-effective and time-effective compared to probability sampling and purposive sampling may be the best method available if there are only a limited number of primary data sources who can contribute to the study. On the other hand, this type of sampling have to deal with some constraints such as lower ability to generalize research findings against probability sampling, vulnerability to errors in judgment by researcher, low level of reliability and high levels of bias which, however, were already taken into account when decided to design the thesis as previously described.

In addition, researchers (Saunders et al., 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2011) state that it is difficult to establish the exact number of interviews that have to be done in order to get enough information about a topic. However, when the semi-structured interview is the technique decided to be conducted in a study, could be sufficient to conduct only a few interviews with key informants, purposive sampling, from the study community. In addition to that and according to Saunders et al. (2012), the minimum sample sizes in non-probability sampling when conducting semi-structured interviews range between five and twenty-five and highly depends on the nature of the study, limitations and such, which is in line with the number of respondents had in this study.

Following it is described the respondents' profile, stating a bit of their educational background professional achievements and expertise in order to show that their profiles are relevant to provide crucial information that will be used to address the research questions in combination with what it has been found in the literature review.

- Luca Giraldi

Luca Giraldi is an expert in Customer Experience, digital transformation and visionary entrepreneur. He has for years been involved in inspiring some of the most important Italian
brands in creating purchasing paths capable of involving and retaining customers. With a completely humanistic background and a ten-year experience in marketing and business management, in 2015 he enrolled in a PhD in Engineering, which he successfully completed in 2019, specializing in digital technologies for the Omnichannel Customer Experience. He had written over 20 technical-scientific publications in international journals and conferences, exploring various topics ranging from User Experience to Neuromarketing, to the frontiers of Artificial Intelligence applied to computer vision. The topic of marketing automation was not new to him: anticipating the times already in 2012 he founded Wisocial, the first startup in the Marche region, which proposed a multi-channel platform based on Wi-Fi to connect customers within physical stores, which was adopted by the Teddy Spa group. Today Luca is CEO and co-founder of EMOJ and author of the partnership with Flowing, which is projecting the startup into the big e-commerce market based on artificial intelligence.

- **Alejandro Saavedra**

Alejandro Saavedra is a customer experience consultant for a consultancy firm that works with customer and employee. In the past, he had been working in the digital transformation of companies to assist the businesses and its customer while transforming the firm in a digital one. In addition, he has taken projects concerning aspects of culture transformation within an industry and customer experience customization. His background includes Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software certificate which is the base to manage customer experience at a business level when taking care of all the interaction that the customer has with the companies. Further, his academic background consists of a degree in Marketing.

- **Karin Seppä**

Karin Seppä is an International Marketer and Communications Consultant with experience in both Below-the-line advertising which is an advertising strategy in which a product is promoted in mediums other than radio, television, billboards, print and film and Above-the-line advertising is where mass media is used to promote brands and reach out to the target consumers. On top, she is an expertise in marketing analysis and communications as well as brand specialist. Her academic background consists of international business studies with marketing specialization. In addition, she has international experience since she worked in Mexico about marketing strategies and having her own company of marketing analysis. Currently working for a Norwegian company of telecommunications.

- **Subject A**

Swedish, living in Stockholm, holding a bachelor’s in economics and business obtained at Uppsala University, and holding a Master’s in marketing at the University of Gothenburg. Subject A an expert on the experience part of marketing field. Before working for a well-known multinational company in the industry sector in study in this thesis Subject A worked in others multinational company regarding sustainability in the business and the interaction with the
consumers, as product brand manager regarding aspects of the consumer experience and relations with the brands. Currently working in one of the leading electric appliances companies and be assigned to the consumer experience team focusing on consumer research, in both micro and macro perspective. In addition, tasks are related to researching innovation and marketing elements and focusing on discovering which action could enhance customer expectation and experiences. Further, Subject A is also responsible for the company to deliver marketing campaign for strategic purpose throughout the European region for the whole consumer journey.

- **Subject B**

Subject B is a marketing professional with over 15 years of working experience. Previously worked in Malaysia and Singapore and currently working in the UK as a Group Brand Marketing Manager for one of the biggest players in the market of luxury home appliances. In addition, as academic background, Subject B holds a master’s in management. Subject B tasks in the working environment space from handling marketing communications activities for the home appliances brand, ensure optimal customer experience and drive company’s sales through maximizing Experience Centre appearance and efficiency of sales floor operations and to develop marketing plans as well as manage marketing budgets.

- **Alice Veroni**

Originally from Italy, Alice Veroni studied economics and languages until she moved to London where she started working in a coffee shop as general assistant. Worked her way up in the company becoming a general manager for some of the largest restaurants in the group. Afterwards, she changed employer after a 10 years commitment that gave her deep experience in managing a broad range of venues, from small cafes to multi-site units, clients, suppliers and customer. Currently, she is a deputy account director in an in-house business, running both costs plus and commercial areas.

- **Houzz**

Houzz is a website and online community about architecture, interior design and decorating, landscape design and home improvement (Todeschi, 2012). The Houzz online platform includes photos, articles, product recommendations as well as polls, discussions and blogs raised by the subscribers. It was established in 2009 and in California, United States. Houzz lately became very popular and according to (Carney, 2013) the site has become the biggest residential remodelling community online, grown to this point entirely through word of mouth. As of September 2018, the online community had grown to over 40 million monthly unique users and over 2.1 million active home professionals globally. (Sweeney, 2018). In addition, the founders of Houzz wanted to create a comprehensive website that in a practical and immediate way allows the readers to grasp insight of topics concerning the home environment.
Thus, removing the hassle of consulting, among others, a tall stack of magazines and referrals for home professionals (Houzz Inc., 2019a).

3.5. Research Quality

The aim of this section is to evaluate the quality criteria of this research and how this research study has been performed according to the design method used in qualitative studies. Bryman and Bell (2011) described the relevant concepts related to qualitative methods such as reliability, replicability and validity.

Reliability, as a quality measure related to the method by expecting the results to be stable and repeatable (Bryman and Bell, 2015; p28). Since our approach in this research study to collect primary empirical data is to do semi-structured interviews, it is expected to have low stability in the results due to the factors and implications related to the nature of semi-structured interviews. This to some extent have affected the results, since the involvement, the knowledge and the experience of the interviewees have not been the same during all the interviews and the interpretation of the information collected could be subjective, biased or misinterpreted. In addition, the questions of the interviews are subjective and biased, even though, eventually they aim to be objective in order to do not affect or bias the interviewee answers.

Replicability as a concept of quality measure for qualitative methods relates to the degree that the study can be repeated. In order to facilitate and improve the replicability of the study, it is needed documentation with a clear framework and definition of the methodology and procedure followed during this research study that could be used in further studies of the topic. It is expected to have a high degree of replicability since the part of the secondary data can be easily consulted and it is well explained and defined how the primary empirical data has been acquired. Even though, there is a limitation on the replicability since it has been impossible to get the same primary empirical data. Furthermore, the subjectivity of the researchers’ perspective toward the theory involved applied during the analysis also affect the results of the study and its degree of replicability (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

The concept of internal validity as a quality measure relates to the correlation or match between the researchers’ observations and the theoretical ideas developed initially. Even though in qualitative research internal validity tends to be high, it is stronger in studies using ethnographic research rather than semi-structured interviews. The selection of the interviewees, their subjectivity and the limitation of them, results in a weak internal validity of the research study (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

On the other hand, the concept of external validity as a quality measure “refers to the degree to which findings can be generalized across social settings” (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p. 400). Due to the nature of qualitative research, external validity is very low, since the samplings are very limited, and it is difficult and inappropriate to generalise. In addition, this exploratory study is context dependent, that means that the results found apply in this particular scenario, and there is a limitation when considering them in other contexts (Bryman and Bell, 2015).
3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations need to be followed when conducting academic research. Since the scope of research surrounds information and analysis about topics like customer experience, emotions, business and relationships, the ethical principles in business research defined by Diener and Crandall (1978) have been considered. Possible harm to participants, like physical harm, psychological harm, stress, harm to participants self-esteem or career prospects, is considered unacceptable (Diener and Crandall, 1978). Also, there is a commitment with the principle of informed consent, which means that it is needed to provide enough information about the research to the participants as they might need to make a decision about their participation and cooperation wishes (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Related to informed consent, the third area concerning ethical principles defined by Diener and Crandall (1978) is the invasion of privacy. Privacy is a social right for everyone and any transgression of it have not been accepted. Informed consent and research involvement do not involve any abrogation of the participant privacy rights. The last area is Deception (Diener and Crandall, 1978), during this research information about the research purpose have not been hidden for limitation of participants understanding, avoiding any possibility of harm or deception for them (Bryman & Bell, 2011).
4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

Along this section, the outcome of the performed semi-structured interviews with the experts and the data gathered from a secondary source will be disclosed and analysed. Those empirical findings will be investigated and studied according to a structured process that requires classification of findings in order to compare them effectively.

To start with, theme and sub-themes will be identified. Then, the empirical findings, separated into theme and sub-themes, will be further analysed according to the studied concepts and models presented in the literature review that are addressing the relative theme. Moreover, the findings will be compared and juxtaposed to one to another to spot the similarities and discrepancies. Lastly, a reflection on the correlation between the findings and the literature being reviewed will be drawn.

All being said, the chapter will then expose the themes and sub-themes with the findings accordingly categorized and analysed which will allow to proceed, in the next chapter, to answer the research questions based on the analysis done in this chapter.

Furthermore, the analysis will be performed following the models and concept reviewed in the theoretical framework chapter. Thus, the findings will be analysed in relation to:

- The research about the concept of customer experience, its notion, and how it has been defined by research within the marketing management field.

- The model presented by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), which gives a perspective of the customer journey, the different stages involved during the process and the different touchpoints as categorized by the authors.

- The model presented by Keller (2001), with its focus on brand identities, and its constituting elements (brand image, awareness, meaning, etc), which could ensure a positive/negative connection in the mind of the customer and shape in a positive/negative way the consumers’ experiences with product and services connected to the brand.

- The conceptualisation of brand community done by Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) as presented in the literature review. Consumers form communities around the brand and these communities are seen as the main point of social interaction in which brands connect the consumer to brand and consumer to consumer. In the communities, the members feel an important connection toward one and another sharing consumption experience, beliefs and such that are influencing how they approach and see a brand.

- The relationship theory as presented by Fournier (1998). Relationships are embedded in everyday actions with other people in different forms and level in human life so does
brand relationship. In addition, since people tend to endow brands with human-like personalities, the characteristic of a relationship can be applied to those brands as well. Thus, brands able to recall these human-like relationships, love/passion, self-connection, intimacy and so on, in what the consumer feels, and thinks, could enhance favourable beliefs towards the brand and boost positive experiences.

4.1 Empirical findings and analysis

In this section the empirical findings are presented and juxtaposed one to another to spot the similarities and discrepancies, going through a set of theme and subtheme and performed following the models and concepts reviewed in the theoretical framework chapter. It is believed that this structured form of presenting the findings allows the reader to follow the analysis in an easy and clear way and that it highlights important observations that will allow answering the research questions. In addition, it is believed that directly combining empirics and analysis makes this section more interesting to read and shows in a more direct way, compared to a mere presentation of the findings and analysis on their own, the correlations and similarities spotted. On top, it streamlines the process.

4.1.1 Online communities

A marker that conceptualizes the community approach as described by Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) is the ‘share ritual and tradition’ meaning that the communities usually put an emphasis on shared consumption experiences with product and services connected to a brand. Thus, communities’ members share their experiences and thoughts about the brand. This marker is seen as well in the online forum approached to gather opinion about brand characteristics. In fact, here subscribers share their point of view and consumption practices and advice that to some extent influence the beliefs, thoughts and possibly the overall experience that other consumers have towards a brand, as an example:

“In building our new home we were most adamant to avoid appliances which had failed, we aim to look at reviews about reliability of the newcomer appliances in terms of the durability depending on the type of usage….I suggest this is a good practice before buying any product”

“functionality of the product is important, but I will buy a brand I have had good experience with, like usability, performance, reliability”

“the best advice is to shop for features and price that fit your needs best. Shopping for a specific brand these days won't help.”

Moreover, McAlexander et al (2002) state that in a marketplace setting situation, communities are a crucial place where people nowadays share their experience that can be based on a cognitive, emotional and material level. Following McAlexander et al (2002), it is possible to see this aspect within the comments found in the online forum, for instance:
“What is more important when buying kitchen appliances is that the purchased appliances actually work, at the first time used as well as the many times I need to use them again, so with its reliability I feel safe and avoid servicing it frequently”

The communities are then used to share brand experiences and are an important provider of information for both marketers and consumers. Heding et al. (2009) recognize that this mean of sharing is crucial in the current market panorama since the brand-consumer exchange is done between a countless number of consumers able to share good and bad experiences, their beliefs and spreading rumours faster with current communication technology. In accordance with that, the people interviewed have more or less the same thoughts about online communities and forums. In fact, reviews and online forum are critical not only in this industry context, according to Alejandro, and they can shape the consumers' expectations and attitudes towards a particular brand and category product when they look at other consumers review about the product they are interested in. Subject A and B seems to agree with what it has been said. Indeed, the online communities and forums that come with it influence other consumers very much towards consumers expectation and possibly the experiences making this online touchpoint with the brand and the consumer very relevant in such context and category of product. In addition to that, a growing tendency before purchase decision is made it is to do some online research and seek other buyers’ feedback. Poor feedback is very damaging, where positive feedback is normally translated into 'meets expectations'. This last comment is in line with the managerial implication evaluated from Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 427)

“a brand with a powerful sense of community would generally have greater value to a marketer than a brand with a weak sense of community…. brand community can be a threat to a marketer should a community collectively reject marketing efforts or product change, and then use communal communications channels to disseminate this rejection.”

In addition, an interesting comment from Subject A is that companies can indirectly ‘control’ this forums and community. In fact, if companies operating in this industry design products that are genuinely good, that are really performing, that are doing what they are meant to do with no problem making sure to let people know how their product can enrich our life, the consumer will definitely pick it up and indirectly control the forums.

4.1.2 Brand product and service characteristics

From the customer-based brand model as presented by Keller (2001), it is acknowledged that brand meaning which accounts to establish a brand image is an important step to create favourable feelings when thinking about a brand. More specifically Keller (2001) state that five main performance-related attributes category, if properly addressed are able to deliver positive experiences and association to a product brand and services. However, it is not clear which of those are critical in the specific context. Alejandro, to some extent, is in line with this description, in fact, he is not able to recognize among this performance-related attributes which
are the most important, believing that those depends on how the company wants to position itself in the market or the customer mindset:

> Price is relevant if you as a company base your competition on price point, innovative primary characteristics related to a product are important if you want to be distinguished and recognized as an innovative business and so on so for”.

Subject A seems to give credit on what Alejandro says. In fact, on a theoretical level Subject A does not believe that there are a certain set of characteristics that you as a company should be more focused on in this industry to become a successful brand since all brands are different for a reason. Nonetheless, on a practical level Subject A recognize that aspects like price, functionality, reliability are essential to build a good brand image and create brand awareness in order to be recognized by consumers.

The other experts, surprisingly, are straightforward, experiences towards a brand are mostly influenced by the concept of reliability especially when associated with product and services connected to it. Karin is adding on top an important observation:

> “when the customer budget is very limited, then price becomes the most important aspect to consider for the brand”

Furthermore, Subject B gives an opinion on a more abstract and level when this topic is addressed:

> “all brand characteristics encompass what brand stands for and are equally important. Characteristics are responsible for brand identity and image. They define not only the standards applied when developing products for customers but also brand and product experience they want to deliver”

In addition, it is interesting to notice that when we compared all that it has been said about performance-related attributes to a consumer perspective founded in the online forum, these kinds of responses are found:

> “Usability and Reliability (a tie), are crucial for me”
> “if I need to decide which are important when I buy appliances, it's easily: 1a - Function, 1b - Reliability, 3 – Looks”
> “I look for reliability and features. Great looks are nice, but since my budget is limited, I can’t afford to give looks much consideration”
> “Price and reliability and ease of use are most important to me as well as features, of course. If I think something, in particular, will be useful, and looks are secondary (but still are considered). So, I am willing to pay a bit but not a lot more for the looks and features in the brand that meets my first two criteria. It is why I always buy scratch & dent, makes it easy to get all four.”
> “functionality and reliability is important, but I will buy a brand I have had good experience with”.
> “Budget, features, dimensions, and then the brand and style.”
“Is everyone aware that some brands require proprietary service companies? So, if your appliance requires service, or breaks down, you cannot call a generally great service technician as they are unable to touch certain brands”
“Since I only have (and always will) white appliances, it is a matter of making sure it’s all the same white shade, with no screaming trim as much as possible.”

In other words, what it is acknowledged here it is that the discussions go around characteristics of reliability design, quality, the price which seems are the most important aspect in a kitchen product, especially trade-off of price/quality and reliability. Consumers typically are more specific when asked about product characteristics that influence their decision and gives an indication of such in a more direct and practical level compared to what it was said by researchers and experts.

4.1.3 Intangible related brand characteristics

As it is addressed in the section above brand meaning which accounts to establish a brand image is an important step to create favourable feelings when thinking about a brand. According to Keller (2001), not only five main performance-related attributes categories, if properly addressed, are able to deliver positive experiences and association to a product brand and services but as well four imaginary-related association categories or in other words, four main types of intangible aspects of the brand are able to deliver positive experiences. However, like the ones before, it is not clear which of those are critical in the specific context. In relation to that, Subject A recognizes that two of those categories could to a higher extent deliver positive beliefs towards the brand, namely history, heritage, and experiences category and personality and values category.

“we try to add value when their products and services are being purchased, for instance, an important aspect is to be sustainable and how using their product could make the consumers’ life more sustainable”
“the brand itself have different values like sustainability, heritage, history, professional partnerships that makes the relative brand different and so the choice of those abstract characteristics does really depend on what your company or generically a company culture is and is based on”

Suggesting, according to Subject A that positive association in the mind of the consumers are, or at least could be driven by a brand that takes values and personality similar to the people that are using it, which in this case is heritage and sustainability aspect. However, this is very specific and can be true for the organization Subject A is working for. Not surprisingly the other experts are less straightforward regarding intangible aspects. It is believed that intangible aspects are undoubtedly relevant in the specific context but to a lower extent compared to performance-related product and service characteristics like price, reliability and such. Indeed, as Alejandro suggests, it depends on the price of point and type of buyer persona:
“if it is a premium price consumer does not only expect that the product is working as it should, but you as the consumers are looking for something different that goes beyond reliability, usability”

However, for subject B intangible brand characteristics are still important, in fact

“intangible attributes are able to create an emotional connection, between the brand and the consumers”

And

“evoking human-like personalities could positively benefit brand by improved brand liking and closer brand customer relationship that can increase brand love”

This, to some extent, is what it has been studied by Fournier (1998) in her relationship theory. In fact, relationships take place between human beings and since people tend to endow companies with a brand with human-like personalities, the characteristic of a relationship can be applied to those brands as well. Thus, if a company can create a human-like relationship between its brand and the consumers, for instance love/passion, self-connection, commitment, interdependence and intimacy, a company can influence first, the purchase decisions, second, the experiences of the consumers and third, the durability of this relationship which translates to the creation of loyal consumers.

Further, from a consumer’ point of view, it is important to analyse what it has been said regarding the aspects mentioned in this section. Thus, in the online forum, it is seen that:

“depends where you live, American and European have different cultures. Americans have bigger appliances than the European because they do not have that much tradition of going to shop groceries often, so for example, they need a big fridge and big freezers.”
“Made in the USA was most important for us, as well as reviews for longevity.”
“I am very careful to purchase appliances that are environmentally friendly, sustainability and such are very important for me”

More than a discussion regarding how sustainable a company is, how environmentally friendly is the appliances and/or where the company is coming from, where it produces and design their products and such, has not been found within the forum analysed. Thus, it is recognised that discussion about intangible aspects of a product and service that a company commercialize exist. Nonetheless, those discussions are very limited both in content and number compared to what it has been already acknowledged in the forum about discussions concerning characteristics of reliability design, quality, the price which seems are the most important aspect in a kitchen product, especially trade-off between price/quality and reliability.
4.1.4 Customer experience

As mentioned during this thesis, in the definition of customer experience there has been a lack of consensus among the literature and the marketing experts. In addition, some researchers suggested that the concept could be defined in different ways depending on the context involved.

Through the literature review, it has been possible to identify the most important characteristics and dimensions of the customer experience concept. Since the initial approach to the concept, it evolved significantly, however, most of the recent researchers such as Schmitt (1999), Fornerino et al. (2006), Gentile et al. (2007), Verhoef et al. (2009) or Keyser et al. (2015) agree that important dimensions that are involved and affect the customer experience are the sensorial, the cognitive, the emotional, the social and the physical. Not all the authors agree on the same dimensions when giving their definition of the concept, but most of them agree in the majority of them or similar ones. Thus, it can be stated that regarding the marketing literature these dimensions could be the most important ones involved in the customer experience. In addition, Gentile et al. (2007), stated that the experience is originated from the set of touchpoints or interactions between the customer and the brand during the different stages of the customer journey. Furthermore, Mascarenhas et al. (2006), stated that the customer experience is customer-dependent and context-specific. This fact also highlights that the customer experience is something individual and unique for each customer depending on each particular situation and persona.

Along with the semi-structured interviews, it has been possible to collect empirical data related to the definition of the customer experience concept in general and related to the kitchen appliances industry. During the interviews, the interviewees agreed that expectations are the base for the experience, and the result of meeting or not the previous expectations results in a positive or negative experience. In addition, some interviewees highlighted the importance of the emotions when having an experience. Particularly, Luca Giraldi stated

“the dimensions involved in the customer experience are the sensorial, cognitive, behavioral, social and emotional”

Furthermore, the interviewees stated that the experience is the sum of interactions between the customer and the brand, what we already know as touchpoints. The interviewees agree that the definition is general and applies to all the industries, then depending on the context, the touchpoints and their importance will be different.

- Touchpoints

As addressed in the literature review, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) differentiate 4 different points of touchpoints, brand owned, customer-owned, partner owned and social owned. Most of the interviewees agree that it is important as a brand to own as many touchpoints as possible to control them and deliver the desired experience. The interviewees agreed on that, and on top
highlighted relevant information about specific touchpoints of the industry that are not considered as important as they are. Alejandro believes that

“logistics touchpoints are important touchpoints to consider for the brands and have a critical impact on customer experience, even if in some cases is not considered as it should, and even more in a kitchen appliances industry context”

Alejandro highlights the importance of the touchpoint of timing in logistics when a customer needs a product or service in the right place, the right conditions and the right time. Also, the interviewees stated that quality is crucial and will keep the customer satisfied, avoiding unnecessary interactions in the post-purchase stage. Instead, for Luca, the most important touchpoints are customer-owned,

“otherwise it is really difficult for brands to have them under control, like word of mouth”

Luca believes that word of mouth affects customer experience since it bases and builds the new experience from the previous one that someone else experienced, instead of basing it on brand touchpoints. In relation with it, for Subject A says:

“It is more important to be the first subject talking and introducing the product to the customer, thus, the experience and relationship will be initiated as desired”

On the other hand, for Subject B, the most important touchpoints are the ones that are more meaningful for the customer, like events in which the customers are completely immersed with the brand, and everything is under the brand control to deliver the desired experience and more meaningful for the customers. However, most of the interviewees agree that the touchpoint more important that will finally have a greater effect on the customer experience is the reliability.

4.1.5 Customer journey

Through the literature review, it has been identified three different stages involved in the customer journey. These stages are the pre-purchase, the purchase and the post-purchase (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). All being said, regarding the pre-purchase stage, which is the one that starts with the need of recognition, search, consideration or desire, and the expectations that will be the base of the experience are created, just Subject A believes it is one of the most important stages that affect the customer experience. In fact, Subject A states that

“It is important because builds the relationship between the customer and the brand and it is highly important to build it with the correct and real expectations that will be delivered during the next stages of the customer journey”

showing once again that this relationship as seen in the literature review is an important aspect during the journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Otherwise, for Alejandro, pre-purchase
becomes an important stage to consider, just if the post-purchase stage delivered is equal than the one delivered by the competitors. However, Alice states that

“the pre-purchase is the less important stage and just expectations are created”

Concerning the purchase stage, there are some more interviewees like Karin and Alice, that recognize the importance of this stage but recognizing the post-purchase as the most important stage of the customer journey. Karin recognize the importance of this stage due the possibility to deliver information about the product, service or experience to the customer in the store. It is possible to control that the expectations built are the right ones in line with the experience that the brand wants to deliver. For Alice, the purchase stage is important since it is where the delivery of the product, service or experience starts. Otherwise, Alejandro states that the purchase stage is actually the less important stage since probably it is the shortest stage in terms of time and the difficulties that can appear during the stage are mainly technical issues. The interviewees highlighted and agreed on the importance of owning the touchpoints of the purchase stage, instead of outsourcing them to distributors that will not deliver a specific and personalized experience for your products.

In relation to the last stage of the customer journey, the post-purchase stage, all the interviewees agreed that it is the most important or one of the most important stages. The interviews highlighted the importance of the stage because it is the longest stage, and during this stage, the customer is, in fact, experiencing the product or service delivered by the brand. Alejandro stated that

“the post-purchase stage is the most important one”

and believes that it will have a greater impact on the customer experience, but it also depends on your business model and the touchpoints and stages that are brand owned. For Alice the purchase stage is highly important because involves the delivery of the product, service or experience, and it is where the experience needs to meet the expectations created in the previous stages. For Subject A, this stage is crucial since the brand needs to make sure that the customer is satisfied with the purchase, enhancing customer equity and building customer loyalty.
5. Discussion

In this chapter, the research questions will be answered performing a discussion around what it has been accordingly written in the analysis presented in the section above.

5.1 Considerations and the research questions

In order to answer the main research question, we will answer three sub-questions. The main question is:

Which are the most important dimensions and touchpoints to consider for enhancing customer experience and building brand equity in the kitchen appliances industry?

Consequently, the first sub-question, is:

SQ1: How is customer experience defined in the kitchen appliances industry?

- First how is generally defined explain the lack of consensus and the findings in the literature review

With the information obtained and analysed, it can be stated that it is believed that a general definition for customer experience is possible, considering that each the importance of the touchpoints is context dependent. The most dimensions that involve the experience are classified as sensorial, cognitive, emotional, social or physical. Customer experience is the result of the expectation and the sum of touchpoints that occur along the different stages of the customer journey between the customer and the brand.

The second sub-question is:

SQ2: Which are the most important touchpoints during the customer journey that affect the customer experience in kitchen appliances context?

It has been identified along the thesis that the customer journey is divided in 3 different stages, the pre-purchase, the purchase and the post-purchase. Each stage has different touchpoints that can be owned by the customer, the brand, partners or externals. In order to answer the research question, first, it has been identified that the most important stage of the customer journey in the kitchen appliances context is the post-purchase stage.

Once clearly identified that the post-purchase stage is the most important one and it is the one that affects more the customer experience, it is needed to identify the touchpoints related to it that have a greater impact on the customer experience. An important aspect to consider as a basis for the customer experience is that the experience of the customers must meet the expectations created during the previous stages of the customer journey. If the experience
meets the expectations, then reliability becomes the most important identified touchpoint in a long-term relationship between the customer and the brand. Furthermore, the reliability is not useful if the quality is not as good as expected. Quality has also been identified as an important touchpoint that affects the customer experience in the post-purchase stage. Once identified the most important touchpoints that will improve the customer experience, it is known that a reliable product, service or experience that meet the quality expectations will result in customer satisfaction and will enhance loyalty and word of mouth.

The third sub-question is:

**SQ3:** Which are crucial characteristics of a brand that affect the customer experience in kitchen appliances context?

Throughout the thesis, it has been acknowledged what are the characteristics around a brand that could affect in a positive and negative way the experiences of the consumers both in a generic context and in the specific context. To do so, we relied on different sources starting from more theoretical ones, in the section of literature review, and ending up with on-field empirical findings namely interviews and secondary empirical data coming from an online community forum, Houzz.com. This modus operandi had allowed us to better address this question, and the other questions, at this stage of the thesis.

According to what has been studied in the previous sections of this thesis about brand management a brand usually strictly relates to a product or sets of products and it is of crucial importance since it is the primary influence of what consumers experience with it. Keller (2001) had evaluated that brand attributes vary greatly by context however he states that the most influential one alike price, reliability, durability, serviceability, service efficiency style design and such. This is what to some extent it is experienced in the context of kitchen appliances when the point of view of the consumers is considered. In fact, as previously discussed, consumers when thinking about brands seems to care, most of all, about reliability, usability, ease of use thus, functionality. Price point and the trade-off between price and quality seems to be another important attribute that influences the buying decision as well as shaping and affecting the expectation and experiences of the consumers. In addition, to some extent design of the appliances and how they fit together with the overall design of the kitchen environment thus creating a certain harmony in this environment is an important aspect. Further, more related to the serviceability of the product, consumers are affected to some extent negatively when the product cannot be serviced by a third-party service company.

On the expert side it is acknowledged that essential attributes seem to be reliability, usability and price point that need to match the quality and prestige of the product sold and service provided, in line to what the consumer had written in the online forum. Nonetheless, this is however in contrast with the view of another expert. In fact, one of them does not believe that there are a pre-established set of attributes that a brand need necessarily to have. In fact, important attributes are a natural outcome of what the company culture is, where the company
wants to position in the market and how the relative brand wants to be perceived in the mind of the consumers.

In addition, a crucial aspect for a brand is how people, online forums, blogs and such talks about it. In fact, all the material gathered brings us to state that a channel is extremely important in the way it affects the experience of the consumer and decisions, and in the way a brand is overall perceived by them. In fact, starting from the literature review, it has been acknowledged that communities play an important role in the current market setting, and in influencing other consumers within the organization since among other aspects people in communities share and create a strong relationship with each other able to affect perception and belief about a brand.

All being said, it is true as well on the kitchen appliances context. The statements, retrieved from the houzz.com website, tell that experiences and buying decision are affected by word of mouth and review about specific kitchen appliances product, which the consumers are interested in buy, retrieved on magazines online blogs and such. Underlining the fact that the experiences shared in a community, real or virtual, are very significant. This is not only true on a consumer point of view but it is seen to be true from what the experts interviewed had said. Thus, all of them with a different level of explanation recognize the review found online are crucial in terms of how they can shape the consumers’ expectations and attitudes towards a particular brand, category product and such. Reviews cannot be overlooked by companies operating in this industry since poor feedback is very damaging the image of a brand and since review could be used by other consumers as the base of the expectation which translates then in positive/negative experience depending if the expectation is met or not. In addition, this channel that influences consumer experience is not totally out of control of the business, if companies operating in this industries design product that are genuinely good, recalling concept that strictly relates to canonical product and service attribute, the community is a very useful tool to enhance the experience of the consumer.

Intangible concept resides in aspects that for specific condition makes the brand stands out from the competitors. In fact, sustainability, heritage, company culture and beliefs are the attributes that make Subject A’s organization stand out from the crowd. These intangible attributes could be the characteristics that together with other “more tangible” attributes could drive positive feeling, thoughts and experiences. In addition, for Subject B brands that evoke human-like personalities could positively benefit brand by improved brand liking and a closer brand-customer relationship that can increase brand love and give a sense of intimacy and commitment. Hence, in line to some extent on what researchers had studied when brand resemble human-like personalities in aspect like love/passion, self-connection, commitment, intimacy which play a role in influencing the durability, experience and quality of the relationship with such brand. However, the importance of intangible aspects has some limitations. In fact, the interviewed expert recognizes that intangible aspects are relevant depending on the price point, if it is a premium price consumers does not only expect that the product is working as it should, but you as the consumers are looking for something different that goes beyond which for instance for Subject B is about creating emotional connection. In
addition, the importance depends on which is your buyer persona and what they consider as important.

To sum all up, it has been seen that in the particular context aspects of reliability, price point, quality is dominating the scene. However, the communities and intangible attributes discussed and analysed previously are very influential in the specific context and can to some extent shape how people think about the brand and consequently shape their experiences. Both brand performance-related attributes imaginary-related association with a different degree of importance are then critical in this context to build brand image. In addition, those characteristics can enhance positive brand responses and evoke feelings that will ensure to deliver a positive experience to the consumers. Feelings rising from the characteristics described are in particular sensation of self-assurance, elimination of worries and safety.
6. Conclusions

This chapter will account for general conclusions regarding the thesis. Furthermore, will be presented which implication the researchers believe this project raise and its limitations. Lastly, ethical considerations and suggestions for further research about topics observed throughout the thesis will be given.

6.1 General conclusions.

Throughout this thesis work in order to answer the main research question of which are the most important dimensions and touchpoints to be considered for enhancing customer experience and building brand equity in the kitchen appliances industry, three sub-questions have been answered. To do so, knowledge and insight deriving from the literature review and the empirical data gathered from both primary and secondary sources have been merged.

All that being said we can conclude that consumer experience is a broad topic that accounts for and depends on many different aspects all interconnected one to another. It has been found that the aspect around brands, consumer experience and its touchpoints vary not only in relation to the context in study, but as well according to different stakeholders that deal with them. In addition, it has been seen that during the customer journey even though the post-purchase stage seems to be the most important and it is the one that affects more the customer experience together with the expectation that consumers have built towards a brand, it is important to clarify the touchpoints related to it. In here, it has been discussed that the different experts have different beliefs according to their background and experiences, however, most of them agree that the most important touchpoint, that will finally have a greater effect on the customer experience, is the reliability. The interviewees believe that if the experience meets the expectations, the reliability is what becomes more important in the long-term relationship with the brand.

In addition, it has been discovered that in the consumer journey critical aspects are, apart from the reliability, the price point, quality of the product and interaction with a brand. Further, from all perspectives, we acknowledged that the communities and intangible attributes discussed previously are very influential in the specific context and can to some extent shape how people think about the brand and consequently shape their experiences, even though it is recognized that they the experiences of the consumers to a lower extent compared to the other aspects mentioned above.

Further, with all the information obtained, it is believed that a general definition of customer experience is possible to be stated considering that the importance of each touchpoints is context dependent. Thus, customer experience is the result of the expectation and the sum of touchpoints that occur along the different stages of the customer journey between the customer and the brand. The experiences can be classified as sensorial, cognitive, emotional, social or physical.
In addition, the analysis with our findings helps to contextualise and better define the dimensions of customer experience since as previously discussed researchers believe that it depends on the context in which it is applied, where characteristics of products and services became more or less relevant. Speaking back to what Keller (2001) stated, the challenge for marketers is to ensure that customers have the right type of experiences with products and services in order to be able to deliver the desired thoughts, feelings, images, beliefs, perceptions, opinions, which will become linked to the brand. However, it has been seen that even though he provides a model where he lists multiple product and non-product related characteristics that could enhance the customer experience, he does not provide in which contextual settings those characteristics are more or less important. Thus, it is here that our research plays an important role, it helps to give a contextualization to those aspects in the meaning of identifying, thanks to the support of our empirical findings, which of those attributes, mentioned by Keller (2001), are critical in the specific context. Furthermore, the research gives a dimension of how important brand communities are in the specific context contributing to better define what it has been studied by Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001). In fact, it has been better defined the meaning of ‘share ritual and tradition’, not only in a conceptual way as done by the two researchers but as well in practice, contextualised in an industry scenario with the support of our primary and secondary empirical data. Thus, it has been researched in the contextualised situation how the communities put an emphasis on shared consumption experiences with products and services to see to which extent those communities are able to influence the customer and their experiences, something missing in the previous research.

Lastly, build a brand and its equity is about fostering a number of elements around the brand, such as experiences, emotions, attitudes, relations, culture, and most importantly possibly, loyalty, something that resides in analysing customer behaviour, customer expectation, feelings, experiences and such as underlined previously and which is substantially connected with brand, brand equity and loyalty. In addition, to reach a high degree of loyalty is an important achievement in the branding process, since settled consumers are considered more valuable compared to potential new consumers. It is more expensive to recruit new customers than to keep and take care of existing ones as addressed by different researchers (Aaker, 1992, Alrubaye, & Al-Nazer, 2010, Denoue & Saykiewicz, 2009). Brands, generically speaking, are important means when building consumer loyalty, and in the specific industry context, aspects of reliability, usability, price point and the different touchpoints discussed along this paper are critical to enhance the customer experiences that most likely will translate in building brand equity and in the creation of loyal consumers, as recognised as well by all the experts interviewed.

6.2 Managerial Implications

A managerial implication is that this thesis could be used by brand operating in the context in study as a starting point when further evaluating which are critical characteristics of a brand, with its products and services, that could enhance the consumer experience.
Further, another managerial implication that the thesis underlines with its empirical evidence is the importance of keeping and focusing on consumer-centric strategies and to deliver the right experience to the right consumers, since the expert interviewed recognizes that a positive customer experience often translates to a loyal consumer and it is a tool and mean to gain competitive advantage. In fact, all the experts suggest striving to consistently deliver the right experience and not to overlook the topic acknowledging to be, among other aspects, a source of loyalty and competitive advantage. Karin Seppä “In order to create loyalty, you need to give a positive experience, thus loyalty and consumer experience are very much connected and depending one to another.” Luca Giraldi “today the implementation of customer experience allows to know which companies are going to survive and those who are going to fail”. Alice Veroni “good customer experience will almost always mean repetition of purchase and good reviews, enhancing loyalty”. Subject B “outstanding alignment between customers’ expectations and customers’ experience capabilities delivers competitive advantage”. Just to name a few comments on this point.

Lastly, managers need not to forget that the competitive advantage that consumer-centric strategies could deliver is a possible outcome only when the overall business culture, beliefs and business model is working coherently. It is not an achievement that could be obtained from one day to another.

6.3 Future Research

This study tries to contribute to already existing brand management and customer experience topics and models and, in providing further understanding as to define in a specific context what customer experience is and what it entails. Furthermore, while it has been done much research on consumer experience there has not been much research that tries to explore it in the specific context situation. Thus, this thesis work can be used as a base for future research in the same industry context possibly with a focus on specific service/product, with different product/service or in a different industry context, since it might be adapted to similar or even different industries and context and we believe to be interesting to study to spot similarities and discrepancies.

In addition, since the exploratory nature of this study does not provide conclusive answer future research could consist in exploring the themes treated in this thesis in a more extensive way, trying to mitigate as much as possible the limitation evaluated for this study. For instance, interviewing a larger number of experts that have direct involvement in the industry context and interviewing consumers in combination of checking forums to get empirical data. Accordingly, it would be recommendable and interesting to carry out both qualitative and quantitative methods simultaneously in further studies since it could make the findings more reliable. In addition, conducting interviews in a specific location and controlled environment could result that the findings are subject to the local conditions of the environment.
6.4 Limitations

While conducting the research, we have encountered a set of limitations that to some extent have affected the work. However, since some of these limitations were known in advance, we have tried to temper them in order to not compromise the result of this research. Thus, the main limitations of encountered were:

- **Time constraints**: time constraints of this research have been impacting the thesis. More extended time could have provided us with more participants to be interviewed and analysed. Consequently, other parts of the thesis could have been addressed more in depth, but since these limitations, we had to make choices to mitigate the time and length limit. In addition, as previously addressed in this text, the time limitation had brought the researchers to change the methodology during the data gathering phase. In fact, the initial idea was to gather primary qualitative from the experts' point of view together with primary quantitative and/or quantitative data from the customers' point of view. Regarding the qualitative interviews with experts, the approach has not changed, however, time constraint has limited the number of suitable experts to be interviewed. Hence, more time had possibly permitted to find and question much more different experts with their relative different perspective making to some extent the analysis and discussion more reliable, due to a larger number of respondents. Regarding the consumer point of view, the methodology of data gathering change drastically. In fact, as discussed, the researched have relied on a secondary data source to address consumers’ view on the research topic, namely, an online forum. Hence, to some extent, limiting the researchers to not rely on an approach that could have captured the customers’ perceptions in a more precise and direct manner, like semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and such.

- **Knowledge**: the personal background was limited when considering the topics treated throughout the thesis. Thus, this could have driven us to the possibility of not having a full understanding of the theories addressed. In the same way not having a deep prior knowledge about the theories and the field of study could have led us to not analyse them in the correct way to establish a proper base for the research. However, the motivation and interest that both of us as researchers had on topics pushed us to do even better. Thus, a thorough prior research on the topics treated was performed in order to use the best theories possible to try to mitigate this limitation and achieve the project aim.

- **Participants**: another limitation for this research has been the availability of relevant people working in the specific context. This to some extent has affected the quantity of relevant information to be analysed. In fact, a higher number of perspective from the different subjects could have given more relevant information, which could have been translated into a more reliable analysis since the analysis had taken an emic approach, where the views of the respondents are the most valuable information in the data gathered. According to that, a more direct approach, namely semi-structured interviews,
questionnaire and such, to gather the consumers’ perspective could, instead of secondary data, have provided the researchers with a more direct and precise data. However, as said in one of the previous limitation sections, this approach of data gathering was discarded but suggested to be performed in future researches about the studied topic.

- Amount of data: using interviews as the primary data collection method delivers a huge amount of data to be analysed which is subject to bias. Thus, since it is doing so and the time available for this project was limited, we consider this as one of the main limitations to the research.

- Size: sample size for the research was a limitation. The size of the sample was small, which can limit the reliability of the results, as it cannot be generalized or can be generalized to some extent. Even if, in qualitative research sample sizes are usually small and the number of respondents does not affect the responses of a single participant, the sample size is a considerable limitation.

6.5 Ethical Considerations

During this research ethical consideration had risen which will be discussed as follow. Firstly, ethical considerations had risen when an interviewed expert suggested that an online forum could be used to release fake, negative/positive, comments regarding a brand and/or a specific product. Hence, violating the concept of fair competition in business ethics. Unfair competition is when companies use unfair techniques, practice and behaviours to obtain an advantage against the competitors. This could be the case if companies would use an online forum to discredit the competitors releasing anonymous fake negative comments and/or creating fake accounts to share comments and possibly seriously damaging the image of the competitor. This is an important aspect when online forums are considered since it has been acknowledged that those reviews are very influential and to some extent are shaping the experiences of the consumers and their beliefs towards a brand, product and such. On the other hand, releasing fake positive comments could deliver a competitive advantage for a specific product and brand which, however, is violating the concept of fairness. Secondly, we had encountered certain difficulties with the reuse of qualitative data, such as the difficulty of making settings and people anonymous and the ethical problems involved in such reuse associated with promises of confidentiality, both, when evaluating secondary and primary data, affecting to some extent the reliability of the thesis. Thirdly, there are also ethical issues deriving from the fact that the original researcher(s) may not have obtained the consent of research participants for the analysis of data by others. Lastly, our research has been built up considering equal gender participation in the interviews. The experts interviewed have been considered as such looking at their background and not looking at the country of origins, sex, and so on removing any possibility of discrimination.
References


Houzz Inc. (2019b), POLL: *What is most important when buying kitchen appliances?*, viewed on 25th April 2019, Available at <https://www.houzz.com/aboutUs>.


Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

**Introduction:**
Q1) Could you shortly tell us a little bit about your academic and professional career history?

**Customer Experience**
Q2) For an organization how important is customer and their experience?

Q3) What does it mean for you customer experience?

Q4) Do you think this is a global definition, or it applies to a particular context or industry?

Q5) From your experience which phase is more critical in the customer journey? Are they equally important? Thoughts?

Q6) Of each stage what do you consider is the most critical touchpoint affecting customer experience? What about them in the specific context of home appliances?

Q7) Touchpoints can be controlled by different parts, such the company (Advertising, promotion, packaging, price, service or product attributes), customer (customer needs, payment method decision, customer behaviour), partners or external factors. Which ones do you think are more important and why?

**Brand management**
Q8) In your opinion how brands and the characteristics connected to it (name, reliability, design, image) influence the experience of consumers?

Q9) Which of these brand characteristics in your opinion are the most important in the specific context to deliver a positive customer experience

Q10) According to your knowledge which role online forums and communities plays when we talk about customer experience, does them influence it?

Q11) How do you think brands that evoke human-like personalities affect the customer and their experience since possibly human beings try to endow and look for brands that resemble human relations. Is this a case in this industry?

**Competitive advantage and loyalty**
Q12) How do you think customer experience affect consumers’ loyalty?

Q13) Which role plays customer experience on competitive advantage
Appendix 2. Figure 6. A typology of consumer-brand relationship form, as researched by Fournier (1998, p. 362).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship form</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Case examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arranged marriages</td>
<td>Nonvoluntary union imposed by preferences of third party. Intended for long-term, exclusive commitment, although at low levels of effective attachment.</td>
<td>Karen’s adoption of her ex-husband’s preferred brands (e.g., Mop ‘n Glo, Palmolive, Hellman’s); Jean’s use of Murphy’s Oil soap as per manufacturer recommendation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual friends/buddies</td>
<td>Friendship low in affect and intimacy, characterized by infrequent or sporadic engagement, and few expectations for reciprocity or reward.</td>
<td>Karen and her household cleaning brands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriages of convenience</td>
<td>Long-term, committed relationship precipitated by environmental influence versus deliberate choice, and governed by satisfying rules.</td>
<td>Vicki’s switch to southern regional Friend’s Baked Beans brand from favored B&amp;M brand left behind in the northeast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committed partnerships</td>
<td>Long-term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust, and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances. Adherence to exclusivity rules expected.</td>
<td>Jean and virtually all her cooking, cleaning, and household appliance brands; Karen and Gatorade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best friendships</td>
<td>Voluntary union based on reciprocity principle, the endurance of which is ensured through continued provision of positive rewards. Characterized by revelation of true self, honesty, and intimacy. Congruity in partner images and personal interests common.</td>
<td>Karen and Reebok running shoes; Karen and Coke Classic; Vicki and Ivory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compartmentalized friendships</td>
<td>Highly specialized, situationally confined, enduring friendships characterized by lower intimacy than other friendship forms but higher sociocultural rewards and interdependence. Easy entry and exit attained.</td>
<td>Vicki and her stable of perfumes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinships</td>
<td>Nonvoluntary union with lineage ties.</td>
<td>Vicki’s brand preference for Tetley tea or Karen’s for Ban, Joy, and Miracle Whip, all of which were inherited from their mothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebounds’ avoidance-driven relationships</td>
<td>Union precipitated by desire to move away from prior or available partner, as opposed to attraction to chosen partner per se.</td>
<td>Karen’s use of Cornet, Gateway, and Sucoes Rice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood friendships</td>
<td>Infrequently engaged, affectively laden relation reminiscent of earlier times. Yields comfort and security of past self.</td>
<td>Vicki’s Nestle’s Quik and Friendly’s ice cream; Jean’s use of Estée Lauder, which evokes memories of her mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtships</td>
<td>Interim relationship state on the road to committed partnership contract.</td>
<td>Vicki and her Musk scent brands during initial trial period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependencies</td>
<td>Obsessive, highly emotional, selfish attractions cemented by feeling that the other is irreplaceable. Separation from other yields anxiety. High tolerance of other’s transgressions results.</td>
<td>Karen and Mary Kay; Vicki and Soft ‘n Dry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filings</td>
<td>Short-term, time-bounded engagements of high emotional reward, but devoid of commitment and reciprocity demands.</td>
<td>Vicki’s trial size shampoo brands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enmtries</td>
<td>Intensely involving relationship characterized by negative affect and desire to avoid or inflict pain on the other.</td>
<td>Karen and her husband’s brands, post-divorce; Karen and Diet Coke; Jean and her other-recommended-but-rejected brands (e.g., Jif peanut butter, Kohler stainless steel sinks).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret affairs</td>
<td>Highly emotive, privately held relationship considered risky if exposed to others.</td>
<td>Karen and the Tootsie Pops she sneaks at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enservlements</td>
<td>Nonvoluntary union governed entirely by desires of the relationship partner. Involves negative feelings but persists because of circumstances.</td>
<td>Karen uses Southern Bell and Cable Vision because she has no other choice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>