



The consumer-based brand equity deconstruction and restoration process: Lessons from unliked brands[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This research is motivated by the growing negative consumer sentiment, perceptions and behaviors toward brands, and the increasing need for firms to develop actionable strategies to address this phenomenon. By recognizing the paucity of research on consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) for unliked brands, the aim of this research is to illuminate the CBBE deconstruction and restoration process for consumers' unfavorable brands. Analyzing relevant consumer survey data by means of fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) identifies *self-brand connection* and *partner quality* as the key links for the deconstruction and restoration of CBBE respectively. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings and directions for future research.

1. Introduction

Developing strong brands is the aspiration of most managers, who strive to have these kinds of brands in their brand portfolio. The most commonly used indication of the strength of favorable brands is brand equity. Researchers use different perspectives and terms for brand equity, such as consumer-based, sales-based, financial-based, firm-based and employee-based brand equity to report this diversity in brand equity's conceptualizations (Baalbaki & Guzmán, 2016; Datta, Ailawadi, & van Heerde, 2017). The most widely used indicator of brand equity in the marketing literature is consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), which refers to "a set of perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors on the part of consumers... that allows a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name" (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010, p.48). Extensively, research uses CBBE as a proxy for the strength of brands with positive consumer predisposition (Aaker, 1991; Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010; Veloutsou, Christodoulides, & de Chernatony, 2013).

Researchers increasingly acknowledge that CBBE as a concept and its formation are far from simple. There is little agreement on the specific dimensions that capture CBBE (see, Veloutsou et al., 2013)

however, most research recognizes that CBBE consists of numerous interrelated dimensions and the literature supports the need to approximate CBBE more comprehensively (2016; Keller, 1993; Lehmann, Keller, & Farley, 2008). Consequently, researchers have recently examined CBBE formation using complexity and configural theory, which appreciates that the overall strength of the brand (overall brand equity) is formed via a combination of different components (Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides, & Veloutsou, 2019; Chatzipanagiotou, Veloutsou, & Christodoulides, 2016).

CBBE research primarily examines the strength of specific pre-selected (by the researchers) brands or the most favorable brands identified by the respondents (i.e., liked, strong brands). This is due to the interest of marketing scholars and practitioners on positive rather than negative aspects of consumption, as many believe that understanding consumers' willingness to buy specific brands is more important in building strong brands (Dalli, Romani, & Gistri, 2006). Extant research tends to neglect brands that, although well known, are not enjoyed, admired, cherished, honored, or considered agreeable with consumers. These brands are defined, here, as unliked (by consumers) brands. However, recent studies recognize that consumers are often unwilling to relate to brands (Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013); exhibit negative behaviors toward brands that they have strong feelings for (Azer &

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Alexander, 2018; Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2018); avoid (Odoom, Kosiba, Djambah, & Narh, 2019) or reject (Hu, Qiu, Wanc, & Stillman, 2018) or experience negative feelings toward brands, which are sometimes as extreme as brand hate (Fetscherin, 2019; Fetscherin, Guzmán, Veloutsou, & Roseira Cayolla, 2019; Hegner, Fetscherin, & van Delzen, 2017; Romani, Grappi, Zarantonello, & Bagozzi, 2015; Zarantonello, Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi, 2016). Certain researchers even advocate that, today, it is more common for consumers to have negative rather than positive feelings toward brands (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016; Fournier & Alvarez, 2013) and a number of brands featuring on the top of the lists of most liked brands also feature on the top of the lists of the least liked brands (Morning Consultant, 2018; USA today, 2018).

Companies need to manage the increasingly popular negative brand-related outcomes (Japutra et al., 2018; Odoom et al., 2019; Veloutsou & Guzmán, 2017). There are concerns about the consequences of consumer negativity and unfavorable actions on the brand equity of less favorable brands (Kähr, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, & Hoyer, 2016; Kucuk, 2016). Strong brands worry most about the loss of their CBBE due to the drastic decline of consumer evaluations following brand failure (Brady, Cronin, Fox, & Roehm, 2008), and the development of strong negative consumer sentiments and actions at individual (Hegner et al., 2017; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Zarantonello et al., 2016) and collective (Abosag & Farah, 2014; Popp, Germelmann, & Jung, 2016) levels (i.e., deconstruction process). Finding ways to reduce negative assessment and improving their position in consumers' minds becomes of particular relevance for brands wishing to grow their customer base (i.e., restoration process) (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013).

Brand equity research focusing on brands that are neither pre-selected nor characterized as favorable by consumers is, indeed, scattered and does not provide clear implications to theory and practice. Research indicates that brand equity and the investigation of aspects related to unliked brands are both on future research agendas (Kähr et al., 2016; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009) and constitute key priorities for brand management (Veloutsou & Guzmán, 2017). Simultaneously, researchers call for a better understanding of brand equity-building for brands consumers relate badly to (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013). To engage with unliked brands, research sometimes uses terms such as “negative brand equity” when consumers are willing to act unfavorably toward the brand (Lee, Motion, & Conroy, 2009); and “anti-brand equity” when consumers favor the brand less when the brand team invests more in its support (Dalli et al., 2006). Neither of these studies has a clear focus on what the low (or negative) nature of brand equity is nor is its formation process detailed.

This study seeks to achieve two main objectives: First, to illuminate the process by which already unliked brands further weaken their CBBE and become even less favorable; second, to develop an understanding of how these brands can restore their desired position in the minds of the people who do not like them by strengthening their CBBE. Unfolding the process or CBBE deterioration and restoration for unliked brands is important because of the increasing number of consumers who engage with brands in a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral level, resulting in losses in the overall brand equity. In line with previous research, this paper conceptualizes CBBE as a sequential, causal process in a complex system, which includes three sub-systems, namely *Brand Building*, *Brand Understanding* and *Brand Relationship* (2019; Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2016). While this model was previously used to examine how preferred brands could be further grown, it is arguably a relevant tool that can yield insights into the decline of least favorite brands' equity.

The paper first sets the scene by providing a clear explanation of the concept of strong brands and detailing the approaches in the conceptualization and operationalization of CBBE. Then the research focus and the methodology follow. Finally, the results are presented and discussed with specific implications for theory and practice and special reference to the limitations of the study.

2. Strong but unliked brands

Strong brands typically enjoy high levels of awareness and recognition, well-established and clear brand associations and high differentiation (Kay, 2006; Keller, 1993, 2016; Wang & Ding, 2017; Wolter, Brach, Cronin, & Bonn, 2016). Some consumers engage positively and others negatively with the same focal brand (Azer & Alexander, 2018) and most strong brands are able to elicit strong emotional reactions from consumers (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016; Fournier & Alvarez, 2013; Woodside & Walser, 2007). Research predominantly regards as strong those brands that consumers generally accept and favor (Brady et al., 2008; Buil, Martinez, & de Chernatony, 2013; Goh, Chattaraman, & Forsythe, 2013; Wang & Ding, 2017; Wymer & Casidy, 2019), even when they do not purchase them (Woodside & Walser, 2007); a view corroborated by consultancies' tools to value brands such as Interbrand.

Several studies on strong brands provide evidence that consumers generally exhibit a more positive attitude and behavior toward strong (rather than weaker) brands. Stronger brands consistently increase in popularity (Aaker, 1991), have a ‘halo effect’ in comparison to weak brands and are generally preferred (Wymer & Casidy, 2019). Consumers are more prepared to accept the choices of strong brands' marketing teams on the brands' market presentation (Goh et al., 2013); are more willing to justify strong brands' actions, for example in cases where firm-initiated brand communities do not accept them as members (Wang & Ding, 2017); are more willing to forgive product failures (Brady et al., 2008); and are less affected by negative word-of-mouth (Ho-Dac, Carson, & Moore, 2013).

However, most of the literature on strong brands overlooks strong but not as much liked brands (unliked brands). Well-known brands in various categories evoke strong passionate feelings and reactions (Fetscherin et al., 2019; Zarantonello, Romani, Grappi, & Fetscherin, 2018) and brand rejection is associated with brand status (Hu et al., 2018). Reports reveal that strong brands have a large number of people who dislike them or avoid them, including brands such as Diet Pepsi, Philip Morris, Red Bull, and CNN in the US (Morning Consultant, 2018), Marmite, Ryanair, McDonalds, Starbucks, Facebook and KFC in the UK (Gander, 2015), or Samsung Galaxy Note 7 internationally (Odoom et al., 2019). Strong brands also experience group anti-brand action, since brands with higher brand value are more likely to have anti-brand sites set up by consumers (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009), clearly indicating there are consumer groups who do not rank them highly. Some of these well-known, strong brands, such as McDonald's, Starbucks and BP, are polarizing brands in the sense that they have, simultaneously, large numbers of lovers and haters (Luo, Wiles, & Raithel, 2013) due to their ability to alienate consumer segments (Osuna-Ramirez & Veloutsou, 2019; Wolter et al., 2016). Brand polarization provides more evidence that strong brands provoke deep, passionate feelings, but these feelings can be negative for certain consumers (Osuna-Ramirez & Veloutsou, 2019).

Even if both academics and practitioners highlight the importance of shedding light on the CBBE building process of unliked brands, the majority of the studies focus mainly on the actions that consumers typically take against these brands (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009) rather than the process, *per se*. They investigate the negative consumers' actions, which may involve complaining (Romani, Grappi, & Dalli, 2012; Zarantonello et al., 2016); producing negative word-of-mouth (Hegner et al., 2017; Zarantonello et al., 2016); brand switching (Romani et al., 2012); developing oppositional loyalty for another brand (Popp et al., 2016); deliberately sabotaging the brand (Kähr et al., 2016); and taking revenge (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009; Hegner et al., 2017). Several researchers highlight that some consumers are even willing to act in an opposing manner, collectively joining anti-brand communities that operate on various platforms (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Popp et al., 2016) or participating in a brand boycott (Abosag & Farah, 2014; Zarantonello et al., 2016).

3. Consumer-based brand equity

The academic literature uses direct and indirect measures to approximate CBBE (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010). Direct measures seek to quantify brand equity directly and approach it by focusing on real consumer preferences (Park & Srinivasan, 1994) or utilities (Erdem & Swait, 1998). Indirect measures operationalize CBBE through its demonstrable dimensions and provide more guidance to practitioners (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010).

Most of the studies that focus on CBBE appreciate its multifaceted nature and approach it as a multi-dimensional construct. There is little agreement on the dimensions that constitute CBBE (Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005; Veloutsou et al., 2013; Christodoulides et al., 2015; Datta et al., 2017), but most empirical studies that use the indirect approach adopt Aaker (1991) conceptualization, identifying brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty as relevant CBBE components, which is not void of criticism (Christodoulides et al., 2015).

Although the majority of studies approach brand equity in a linear manner, conceptually, academics appreciate that CBBE development is a process with evolutionary stages of closely interrelated brand concepts, which create strong brands through a “branding ladder” (2016; Keller, 1993). Recent research by Chatzipanagiotou et al. (2016; 2019) approximates brand equity development as a process and suggests the formation of CBBE is non-linear and complex. The proposed model depicts in a cognitive, affective, and conative approach (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) three critical stages which consumers pass through in order to sequentially build their overall brand equity. The paper further suggests that, overall, CBBE is an outcome of specific building blocks which include interrelated brand concepts as shortcuts of information. The 15 concepts captured in the study are organized in three building blocks, *Brand Building Block* (BBB), including functional-related brand elements: brand quality, competitive advantage, leadership and experiential-related: personality, heritage and nostalgic elements; *Brand Understanding Block* (BUB) consisting of brand awareness, associations, reputation, self-connection; and *Brand Relationship Block* (BRB) conceptualized as brand trust, relevance, intimacy, partnership quality. The approach looks for sufficient configurations of the elements/concepts constituting each block that contribute to the activation of subsequent blocks as well as of overall brand equity (OBE).

4. Research focus

4.1. Brand building in the case of unliked brands

Strong yet unliked brands have clear and well-established associations, as all strong brands do, but have an unfavorable position in certain consumers' minds (Fetscherin et al., 2019) due to their disposition toward brand associations or brand-building actions (Odoom et al., 2019). Brand equity is developed over time through marketing actions (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000) and even liked brands can lose part of their positive power following their actions (Cova & D'Antone, 2016). There are indications that the strength of the negativity toward certain brands springs from negative perceptions, assessment, and attitude toward important consumer issues associated with these brands. However, the majority of the studies seek reasons for these negative perceptions to brand contextual characteristics, such as religion (Abosag & Farah, 2014), political ideology (Morning Consultant, 2018; Sandikci & Ekici, 2009) or country of origin (Bryson, Atwal, & Hultén, 2013; Khan & Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2009) rather than the inherently-related components of the CBBE process itself (e.g., brand imagery and functional characteristics). In cases where they do so, they concentrate on specific CBBE process structural elements such as brand personality aiming to illustrate how for example brand personality can influence the consumers' willingness to forgive a brand and help in the recovery of the brand after a brand failure (Hassey, 2019).

On other occasions, consumers assess certain brand-building activities that form cognitive and emotional triggers (Azer & Alexander, 2018), such as the frequency and time of sales promotion and communication, perceived quality, performance, or overall behavior and moral stands of the brand, below or opposing expectations (Bryson et al., 2013; Dalli et al., 2006; Demirbag-Kaplan, Yildirim, Gulden, & Aktan, 2015; Hegner et al., 2017; Kucuk, 2016; Lee et al., 2009; Odoom et al., 2019; Yoo et al., 2000). In these cases, even if the links between consumers' cognitive and emotional states are implied there is no clear explanation of how this evolutionary transformation takes place, resulting in these brands' equity disintegration.

4.2. Brand understanding in the case of unliked brands

Interestingly, strong yet unliked brands have recognition, strength, and clarity of association but also have low overall brand equity in the minds of certain consumers, as expressed by their attitudes and behaviors. This is probably due to the fact that consumers who identify brands as unfavorable and reject them associate themselves less with them rather than the most favorable (Sprout et al., 2009). They have low self-concept connection, high incongruence and disidentification with these brands (Hegner et al., 2017; Wolter et al., 2016) due to an overall incongruence with the established brand associations or/and with a reference group that likes this brand (Bryson et al., 2013; Khan & Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2009; Sandikci & Ekici, 2009). The above constitute significant findings in order to explain what went wrong in the CBBE building process, especially regarding consumers' brand meaning and understanding.

4.3. Brand relationships in the case of unliked brands

Researchers consent that consumers develop negative feelings toward unliked brands expressed in terms of brand-negative relationships of a weak (brand dislike) or strong (brand hate) nature (Fetscherin et al., 2019), or by developing brand aversion. Brand dislike is the feeling of displeasure, antipathy or aversion toward the brand (Demirbag-Kaplan et al., 2015), “the negative judgment expressed by the consumer” (Dalli et al., 2006, p. 87). Brand hate is a passionate and more complex negative feeling (Bryson et al., 2013; Fetscherin et al., 2019; Fetscherin, 2019) that some suggest can take several forms (Fetscherin, 2019; Kucuk, 2019) and can develop over time even for brands that were previously loved (Grégoire et al., 2009). Some suggest that it can take an active or passive form and in its active form incorporates anger, contempt and disgust, while in its passive form fear, disappointment, shame and dehumanization of the brand (Zarantonello et al., 2016). Others see brand hate as one emotion that incorporates most of these sub-dimensions and overall rejection of the brand (Hegner et al., 2017). Brand aversion is the opposite end of brand attachment in the relationship spectrum (Park et al., 2013), which could also mean that consumers feel distant from the brand and do not wish to engage in any form of relationship, thus avoiding the brands they dislike (Grégoire et al., 2009; Hegner et al., 2017; Khan & Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2009). There are very few exceptions where unliked brands still enjoy high appreciation (loyalty levels) and these are because of the bond with the brand triggered by the lack of alternatives, inertia, or a deep emotional connection with the brand caused by attributes such as nostalgia (Demirbag-Kaplan et al., 2015). Several studies highlight the dynamic nature of CBBE and the importance not only of understanding the role of consumers' negative emotions and brand relationship to CBBE deconstruction, but also their potential for the CBBE restoration process. They report that the negative emotions toward a brand evolve and can get better or worse over time (Zarantonello et al., 2018) explaining the conditions under which brand-related failures can be forgiven (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019; Hassey, 2019).

4.4. Study's focus

Although existing research neglects the topic of CBBE of unliked brands as a construct or process under investigation, the above studies provide evidence that elements incorporated as critical components of the CBBE building process are negatively affected. Academic research appreciates a brand-building process for less favorable or hated brands (Kucuk, 2016), however, existing research does not explain two processes which are, arguably, important for companies managing these strong yet often unliked brands. The first is the mechanism of brand deconstruction, which allows the detection of what went wrong in the CBBE building process while the second, the restoration process, could help to reverse the deconstruction, improve evaluation, and restore the overall brand equity of unliked brands, thus, avoiding the undesired, negative effects indicated above. The present study aims to illuminate these two processes, namely: (a) the CBBE deconstruction and (b) CBBE restoration process.

By adopting the conceptual framework of Chatzipanagiotou et al. (2016; 2019) the present study recognizes the CBBE building process as a complex, dynamic, and idiosyncratic system which includes three sub-systems, namely: BBB, BUB and BRB. The model substantiates that multiple configurations of the brand concepts included in each of these building blocks lead consumers to the next stage of this process and, eventually, to overall brand equity. It also draws direct connections between these stages and the consumers' overall brand equity in order to demonstrate the dynamic nature of the CBBE process and capture brands that have been on the market for a long time and which have already built, to some extent, their brand equity.

Even if the model had been proposed for decoding the CBBE process for favorable brands, it is expected that the three building blocks can contribute both to the understanding of the downfall of CBBE (deconstruction process) as well as to the rebuilding of damaged brand equity (restoration process). The model possesses advantages in design, making it appropriate for the explanation of the CBBE building process for unliked brands. CBBE is constructed within a complex system; therefore, it permits the identification of the state of the system by the values of the inputs and outcomes. In other words, the model allows the explanation of both low and high scores in CBBE, providing a unique opportunity to simultaneously explain both the CBBE deconstruction and restoration processes. In addition, the model adopts complexity theory's main tenets (causal complexity; asymmetry, and equifinality) (2014; Ragin, 2008; Woodside, 2013). It concentrates on the *causal complexity* surrounding the phenomenon and not on net effects that each of these brand concepts included in each of these building blocks has on the outcome of interest. Building upon the notion of *conjectural causation* the model detects and interprets all the possible configurations of brand concepts (equifinality principle) that could produce the intermediate outcomes of interest (low and high) during these processes and toward the final outcome of low (deconstruction process) and high scores of consumers' overall brand equity (restoration process) (Ragin, 2008; Rihoux & Marx, 2013). In this way it provides a fine-grained understanding of the idiosyncrasies of brand structures of consumers' perceptions, understanding, and relationship, which could explain the CBBE deconstruction and restoration process for unliked brands. More importantly, the model does not assume that the causes leading to low scores in CBBE are the mirror opposites with the one leading to high scores in CBBE (asymmetry principle) and, thus, it allows their independent investigation (Ragin & Fiss, 2008; Ragin & Rihoux, 2004; Ragin, 2008). Based on the above, we assume that:

P1: Low scores in BBB, BUB, and BRB elements of unliked brands lead to a progressive brand deconstruction, while they also directly affect and sufficiently produce low scores in consumers' OBE (CBBE deconstruction process)

P2: High scores in BBB, BUB, and BRB elements of unliked brands lead to a progressive brand restoration, while they also directly affect and

sufficiently produce high scores in consumers' OBE (CBBE restoration process)

5. Methodology

The data collection instrument to operationalize the CBBE process was in line with Chatzipanagiotou et al. (2016; 2019) and all items for the 15 concepts that make up the CBBE process were adopted from this work (see Appendix 1) and measured on seven-point Likert scales. All respondents had to select a category from a list of goods (e.g., shampoo), services (e.g., coffee shop, bank) or the internet (e.g., retailer) and then identify their 'least favorite' brand from that category. This prompt was consistent with previous consumer-brand research (e.g., Sprott et al., 2009) and led to a wide range of negative consumer dispositions toward brands. Consumers responded to subsequent questions on CBBE relative to their self-identified brand. The study set quotas for age and gender to ensure the sample was representative of the British population in terms of the aforementioned variables. To secure that the sample was representative and that the respondents would answer the questionnaire appropriately, trained researchers collected data through face-to-face interviews, primarily in urban centers in the United Kingdom. To increase the response rate, respondents had a chance to enter a prize draw for one of two gift cards worth £100 each (approximately, \$130).

The interviews lasted about 15 min each. The data collection procedure produced 300 fully completed questionnaires. The data collection approach ensured the evaluation of a large and diverse set of brands that respondents were knowledgeable about and captured brands from various sectors, namely goods (32.6%; including brands such as Pantene); services (38.2%; including brands such as Costa Coffee) and the internet (29.2%; including brands such as eBay). The internal consistency of the measures was assessed using Cronbach alphas and ranged from 0.76 to 0.99.

To test the study's propositions this paper adopts fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) (2008, 2014; Ragin, 2000; Woodside, 2013). As a set-theoretic method, fsQCA encompasses benefits from both a qualitative and quantitative approach. It recognizes each of the cases as a complex entity and aims to identify common patterns among cases in a systematic cross-case analysis. In order to do so, fsQCA identifies the variables as sets, in which each case belongs to a certain degree (set membership) (Marx, Rihoux, & Ragin, 2014; Ragin, 2008). This is achieved by the transformation of variables' measures into set memberships. The study uses the direct method of calibration (Ragin, 2008), which places three qualitative anchors, namely: 1.0 = full membership, 0 = full non-membership, and 0.5 = the crossover point of maximum ambiguity regarding membership, to calibrate each of the study's conditions. Specifically, to generate fuzzy set-membership for each of the study's variables we set cases in the highest quintile equal to 0.95 membership, cases in the middle quintile at 0.50, and calibrated cases in the lowest quintile at 0.05 whilst the software identifies the scores for the second and the fourth quintiles (Woodside, 2013).

To detect all multiple causal configurations of the antecedent conditions that can sufficiently produce the outcome of interest, the method employs set theoretic operations (e.g., subsets, supersets, intersection, union, negation) (see Ragin, 2008) and fuzzy-set algorithms (*true table*). Specifically, the study employs the fuzzy set operation of negation (Logical NOT; mathematical principle in fuzzy algebra) to detect the causal logic driving the CBBE restoration process. Thus, for the opposite pole of each condition the analysis allows the calculation of the membership of a case in the negated fuzzy set (not-A) by taking 1 minus the membership score in the set A (Marx et al., 2014; Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). More importantly, fsQCA allows the detection of *necessary conditions*, which constitute the conditions that must be satisfied for an outcome to occur (Goertz & Starr, 2003; Ragin, 2008; Rihoux & Ragin, 2008). The analysis uses two set indices

to assess the results, namely: consistency and coverage (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012; Woodside, 2013). ‘Consistency’ refers to the percentage of cases exhibiting a specific combination of antecedent conditions having a particular value of the outcome (similar to the correlation coefficient) whilst ‘coverage’ represents the percentage of all cases that follow a specific causal configuration (similar to the coefficient of determination) (Ragin, 2008). The study adopts a minimum of three cases to be included for further consideration and 0.80 as the minimum consistency threshold limit, for derived solutions’ acceptance (Ragin, 2008). Furthermore, the analysis detects core-periphery models aiming to identify conditions that have a strong (core causes) or less strong relationship (periphery conditions) with the outcome of interest (for a detailed discussion of core-periphery models, see Fiss, 2011; Ragin & Fiss, 2008)³.

6. Results

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics and the correlations among the study’s conditions. Correlations among the study’s variables are all below 0.80, indicating that asymmetric relationships occur among the study’s conditions (see Woodside, 2013; 2014).

Analysis of necessary conditions for low and high scores in consumers’ OBE (Table 2) demonstrates that low scores of consumers’ brand self-connection constitutes a necessary condition (consistency = 0.81; coverage = 0.77) in the CBBE deconstruction process whilst consumers’ brand partner quality is a necessary condition (consistency = 0.81; coverage = 0.78) toward the development of high scores of consumers’ OBE of unliked brands (CBBE restoration process).

Certain combinations can further explain both low and high scores of the necessary conditions (Table 3). Specifically, consumers’ low perceptions for brand nostalgic elements and perceived quality (raw coverage = 0.60; unique coverage = 0.28) lead to low scores in consumers’ brand self-connection (Table 3, panel a). Two solutions can help consumers to redound consumers’ damaged personal link with unliked brands. Both solutions, based on the pivotal role of brand nostalgic elements, in combination with either brand heritage, perceived quality and leadership (solution 2) or brand personality in a peripheral role (solution 1). The results also denote the pivotal, core role of consumers’ brand self-connection; its low or high scores provide, respectively, sufficient prediction of consumers’ brand partner quality low and high scores (Table 3, panel b).

Low scores in BBB, BUB, and BRB elements can sufficiently explain low scores in consumers’ OBE (CBBE deconstruction process), providing support to P₁ (Table 4, panel a). Specifically, four solutions of BBB elements can sufficiently explain low scores in OBE (Table 4, panel a, section i). Solution 1 explains the majority of the cases (raw coverage = 0.52; unique coverage = 0.33; raw consistency = 0.88) indicating that a combination of low scores in consumers’ perceptions on the brand nostalgic elements, competitive advantage, and leadership can sufficiently explain low scores of OBE for unliked brands. The results also detect two solutions of BUB that can sufficiently explain consumers’ low OBE (Table 4, panel a, section ii). Both solutions focus on the low scores of consumers’ brand self-connection. Solution 1, is the most significant in terms of cases’ interpretation (raw coverage = 0.52; unique coverage = 0.28; raw consistency = 0.82) and suggests that a combination of low scores in consumers’ self-brand connection and reputation leads to low scores in OBE. Three combinations of low scores in BRB elements can sufficiently explain low scores of OBE (Table 4, panel a, section iii). Solution 2 is the most significant in terms of raw (=0.46) and unique coverage (=0.36) (Ragin, 2008) demonstrating that a combination of consumers’ brand trust and partner quality low

scores (core conditions) coupled with low scores of customers’ intimacy (peripheral condition) lead to low scores of OBE for unliked brands.

The results indicate that high scores in BBB, BUB, and BRB elements can sufficiently predict high scores in consumers’ OBE (CBBE restoration process), providing support to P₂ (Table 4, panel b). Specifically, a combination of high scores in consumers’ perceptions on brand heritage and nostalgic elements can sufficiently produce high scores in consumers’ OBE (Table 4, panel b, section i). With regard to BUB, high scores in consumers’ brand self-connection in combination with high scores of consumers’ evaluation of these brands’ reputation in a peripheral role can restore OBE for unliked brands (Table 4, panel b, section ii). In addition, a combination of high scores in BRB in terms of consumers’ brand trust, relevance and partner quality can lead the majority of consumers (raw coverage = 0.56; unique coverage = 0.49; raw consistency = 0.92) to increase their OBE toward unliked brands (Table 4, panel b, section iii).

For the detection of the core-periphery models, which explain the CBBE intermediate deconstruction and restoration processes individual fsQCA was performed for each of the individual concepts included in the brand building blocks. The results provide support to P₁ and P₂. The summary of the fsQCAs results for all the brand concepts constituting the building blocks (Table 5) provides a fine-grained understanding of the rationale of CBBE deconstruction and restoration process for the unliked brands (due to lack of space the results of these analyses are available on request). These results are of high diagnosticity, allowing explanation of how low scores in antecedent conditions, located on the left-hand side of the table and represented with the symbol (⊗), feed a low feedback score’s sequence through the different stages of the CBBE deconstruction process, eventually providing low scores of OBE. In a similar manner, the high scores of these antecedent conditions, represented with the symbol (●) enable a sequence of high scores in a virtuous activation process, which goes through the different stages and toward an increased OBE (CBBE restoration process). More importantly, the results do not reflect a symmetrical or mirror-opposite relationship between the CBBE deconstruction and restoration processes. This emphasizes that an asymmetric relationship between the two processes exists - the causes making consumers dislike a brand are not mirror-opposites with those making them like it.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Theoretical implications

This study advances knowledge in the emerging fields of brand rejection, which constitutes an area of high priority for branding theory and practice alike (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016; Kähr et al., 2016; Veloutsou & Guzmán, 2017). Acknowledging the complex, dynamic and idiosyncratic nature of the CBBE phenomenon, this is the first empirical study which identifies the core causes and theoretical ‘recipes’ that pervade consumers’ low brand understanding and relationship with the brand which, consequently, lead to brand rejection. The CBBE process, following the *cognitive-affective-conative* sequence, has high diagnostic power in interpreting consumers’ perceptions, attitudes and behaviors for unliked brands in a similar manner to those of consumers’ favorable brands.

The findings further identify key links (or triggers) in this sequential process. The deconstruction of CBBE for consumers’ unliked or ‘least favorite’ brands filters through self-brand connection, which is identified as a necessary condition through this analysis. This is in line with research linking unliked brands with identity avoidance on an individual and collective level (Odoom et al., 2019) and low self-concept connection, high incongruence and disidentification (Hegner et al., 2017; Wolter et al., 2016). Low *self-brand connection* is able to explain low-scores in CBBE and is identified as the ‘weakest link’ which does not allow consumers to progress further into the CBBE process and achieve significant relational outcomes. These, otherwise strong

³ The data analysis also incorporated alternative tests to secure the robustness of the results (see Skaaning, 2011). The findings did not deviate significantly from the initial results and interpretations.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study's concepts.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Brand Building Block (BBB)																	
Brand personality	3.97	1.79	1														
Brand nostalgia	2.07	1.47	0.335**	1													
Brand heritage	3.16	1.75	0.113*	0.097	1												
Brand quality	2.95	1.59	0.360**	0.478**	0.194**	1											
Brand competitive advantage	2.89	1.65	0.461**	0.414**	0.228**	0.667**	1										
Brand leadership	2.93	1.59	0.109	0.098	0.772**	0.205**	0.251**	1									
Brand Understanding Block (BUB)																	
Brand awareness	5.56	1.35	0.492**	0.115*	0.004	0.181**	0.139*	0.004	1								
Brand associations	4.23	1.55	0.716**	0.151**	0.068	0.320**	0.426**	0.068	0.458**	1							
Brand reputation	3.72	1.83	0.477**	0.258**	0.208**	0.558**	0.668**	0.214**	0.361**	0.502**	1						
Self-brand connection	1.86	1.33	0.278**	0.733**	0.102	0.560**	0.489**	0.104	0.030	0.144*	0.311**	1					
Brand Relationship Block (BRB)																	
Brand trust	2.82	1.53	0.330**	0.515**	0.191**	0.742**	0.564**	0.195**	0.145*	0.220**	0.463**	0.601**	1				
Brand relevance	2.03	1.42	0.285**	0.714**	0.095	0.529**	0.429**	0.105	0.091	0.156**	0.306**	0.771**	0.585**	1			
Brand intimacy	2.01	1.75	0.381**	0.583**	0.133*	0.507**	0.403**	0.102	0.180**	0.212**	0.356**	0.549**	0.473**	0.540**	1		
Brand partner quality	1.94	1.37	0.286**	0.707**	0.114*	0.629**	0.511**	0.123*	0.044	0.140*	0.319**	0.734**	0.667**	0.710**	0.535**	1	
Overall Brand Equity (OBE)																	
Overall brand equity	1.97	1.43	0.245**	0.563**	0.107	0.580**	0.508**	0.111	0.009	0.111	0.311**	0.727**	0.640**	0.716**	0.528**	0.735**	1

Note: *Correlations are significant at the 0.05 level; ** Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 2
Analysis of necessary conditions.

Conditions tested:	Outcome Variable: OBE			
	Low scores		High scores	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
Brand personality	0.56	0.61	0.60	0.55
Brand heritage	0.70	0.70	0.67	0.67
Brand nostalgia	0.75	0.74	0.71	0.72
Brand perceived quality	0.71	0.73	0.71	0.69
Brand leadership	0.74	0.73	0.69	0.70
Brand competitive advantage	0.72	0.73	0.70	0.69
Brand awareness	0.52	0.56	0.55	0.51
Brand associations	0.54	0.57	0.54	0.52
Brand reputation	0.59	0.66	0.65	0.59
Self-brand connection	0.81	0.77	0.73	0.78
Brand trust	0.73	0.74	0.71	0.71
Brand intimacy	0.66	0.75	0.75	0.67
Brand partner quality	0.79	0.82	0.81	0.78
Brand relevance	0.75	0.79	0.78	0.74

Note: The low and high scores of the above conditions are tested as necessary conditions for the low and high scores of the OBE, respectively.

brands, fail to establish a personal link with consumers who reject them, identifying them as their 'least favorites'. Based on the findings, and consistent with previous qualitative research (Demirbag-Kaplan et al., 2015), the low scores of self-brand connection stem mainly from the lack of relevant brand episodes (or experiences) that stimulate nostalgia in combination with low brand quality perceptions.

Interestingly, the findings are not limited to merely interpreting the low scores of CBBE. Instead, they also highlight how this process can be reversed amongst this segment of consumers with a view to increase CBBE scores and potentially avoid undesired outcomes such as boycotts or negative word-of-mouth. In this direction, the results are in line with results for favorable brands (2019; Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2016) and highlight that specific building blocks can act as key drivers of the CBBE restoration process. For unlike brands the relationship block needs to be activated; specifically, the 'strongest link' or key trigger to reverse the process is identified as *partner quality*, which is a necessary condition for higher levels of CBBE amongst this segment. Strong partner

Table 3
Further analysis of the necessary conditions.

Conditions tested:	A. Consumers' self-brand connection			
	Low scores of consumers' self-brand connection		High scores of consumers' self-brand connection	
	1	2	1	2
Brand personality		⊗	●	
Brand heritage		⊗		●
Brand nostalgia	⊗	⊗	●	●
Brand quality	⊗			●
Brand competitive advantage		⊗		
Brand leadership		⊗		●
Raw Coverage	0.60	0.33	0.33	0.49
Unique coverage	0.28	0.02	0.16	0.32
Consistency	0.90	0.90	0.84	0.90
Overall consistency		0.62		0.66
Overall coverage		0.90		0.87
B. Consumers' brand partner quality				
Conditions tested:	Low scores of consumers' brand partner quality		High scores of consumers' brand partner quality	
	1	2	1	
Brand awareness		⊗		
Brand reputation		⊗		●
Brand associations	●			
Self-brand connection	⊗	⊗		●
Raw coverage	0.44	0.32		0.76
Unique coverage	0.33	0.20		0.76
Consistency	0.87	0.82		0.84
Overall consistency		0.65		0.84
Overall coverage		0.84		0.76

Note: Note: The black circles (●) indicate high scores of a condition, and circles with "x" (⊗) indicate low scores. The large circles indicate core conditions; the small circles indicate peripheral conditions. Blank spaces in a pathway indicate "don't care".

Table 4
Explaining low and high scores of consumers' OBE for unliked brands.

A. Low scores in OBE				
Low scores in antecedent conditions	i. OBE			
	1	2	3	4
BBB				
Brand personality		●	●	●
Brand heritage	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗
Brand nostalgia	⊗			⊗
Brand quality		⊗	⊗	
Brand competitive advantage	⊗		⊗	
Brand leadership	⊗		⊗	⊗
Raw coverage	0.52	0.25	0.19	0.21
Unique coverage	0.33	0.04	0.04	0.01
Consistency	0.88	0.90	0.89	0.90
Overall consistency			0.86	
Overall coverage			0.66	
BUB				
	ii. OBE			
	1	2		
Brand awareness				●
Brand reputation	⊗			
Brand associations				●
Self-brand connection	⊗		⊗	
Raw coverage	0.52		0.20	
Unique coverage	0.28		0.01	
Consistency	0.82		0.82	
Overall consistency			0.83	
Overall coverage			0.60	
BRB				
	iii. OBE			
	1	2	3	
Brand trust		⊗	⊗	
Brand intimacy	●	⊗	⊗	
Brand relevance	⊗		⊗	
Brand partner quality	⊗	⊗		
Raw coverage	0.23	0.46	0.47	
Unique coverage	0.13	0.36	0.04	
Consistency	0.82	0.91	90	
Overall consistency			0.86	
Overall coverage			0.64	
B. High scores in OBE				
High scores in antecedent conditions:				
	i. OBE			
	1			
BBB				
Brand personality				
Brand heritage			●	
Brand nostalgia			●	
Brand quality				
Brand competitive advantage				
Brand leadership				
Raw coverage			0.54	
Unique coverage			0.54	
Consistency			0.80	
Overall consistency			0.80	
Overall coverage			0.54	
BUB				
	ii. OBE			
	1			
Brand awareness				
Brand reputation				●
Brand associations				
Self-brand connection				●
Raw coverage			0.73	
Unique coverage			0.73	
Consistency			0.80	

Table 4 (continued)

Overall consistency	0.80	
Overall coverage	0.73	
BRB		
	iii. OBE	
	1	2
Brand trust	●	●
Brand intimacy		⊗
Brand relevance	●	●
Brand partner quality	●	●
Raw coverage	0.56	0.11
Unique coverage	0.49	0.04
Consistency	0.92	0.81
Overall consistency	0.60	
Overall coverage	0.90	

Note: The black circles (●) indicate high scores of a condition, and circles with “x” (⊗) indicate low scores. The large circles indicate core conditions; the small circles indicate peripheral conditions. Blank spaces in a pathway indicate “don't care”.

quality, as part of a strong relationship, generally helps brands in crisis situations, since consumers respond more favorably to them (Jeon & Baeck, 2016). This, in turn, may be enhanced by attention to self-brand connection and reputation.

The ability to read results in this dual manner reflects the power of the methodology used that does not symmetrically explain the phenomenon but helps identify the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ links in the process as detailed above. While low levels of self-connection are a necessary condition for the deconstruction of CBBE, this self-connection is not a necessary condition for its restoration. What becomes a necessary condition for the restoration process is a higher level component in the cognitive/affective/behavioral chain which entails triggering the relationship block via partner quality. This highlights the fact that CBBE deconstruction and restoration are two separate processes with distinct causal reasoning.

7.2. Managerial implications

This paper provides a holistic view of what leads to consumer-brand rejection by means of a tool that details the pathways to low scores of CBBE in fine granularity. Self-brand connection, which is identified as the strongest ‘weakest’ link, is explained primarily by low levels of nostalgia (these consumers have no common ground with the brand) and low consumer perceptions of brand quality. Monitoring and trying to enhance the self-brand connection should constitute priority areas for brand managers. When brands are perceived as increasingly relevant to the consumers who have a more negative approach toward them, they are likely to initiate the reversing of the low overall CBBE scores for the very same consumers. As an overall strategic approach, brands who manage to enhance consumers’ self-brand connection may altogether avoid being placed in this category of ‘least favorite’ brands. Based on the findings, an appropriate strategy to enhance the self-brand connection can be the establishment of nostalgic associations by reminding past experiences. When a brand brings memories to the minds of consumers, it is likely that it will develop more positive relationships with these consumers and a higher overall CBBE, even in the case of a new in the market unliked brand.

In terms of directions that managers should apply when developing and supporting their brands, the internal consistency and distinctiveness of the brand personality are very important in avoiding and restoring low CBBE scores. Consistent signaling of a strong and relevant brand personality through all the controlled communication channels should be secured by the management team. Treating consumers as valuable customers is also likely to reduce or prevent negativity towards brands.

The common patterns based on the evaluations of a large set of

brands capturing different nuances of brand rejection from brand dislike to brand hate were presented in this paper. When applying these findings to a specific brand, its idiosyncrasies should be taken into account. To conclude, this research suggests that the relationships within CBBE processes are not symmetrical, and the construction and deconstruction of CBBE are not mirror-opposite processes.

7.3. Limitations and directions for future research

The research has limitations that future research may address. First, this is a cross-sectional research and does not fully capture the complexity in the formation of CBBE in the longer-term. Longitudinal data on the CBBE process will highlight the evolution of consumer brand rejection and how this manifests itself via different outcomes, allowing the detection of cases where CBBE went from highly positive to highly negative and vice versa. Such a longitudinal approach will be highly relevant for newly developed brands which create their CBBE from scratch.

Second, this research used a methodology identifying consumers' 'least favorite' brands and, thus, captured a wide range of negative sentiment and specific pre-determined building blocks and elements in each building block. However, the CBBE process for a consumer who hates the brand versus another who merely dislikes the brand may well be different and was not captured in the reported dataset. Future research may look into differences in the CBBE process amongst consumers with different levels in their negative dispositions toward brands and might also incorporate different or additional elements in

this investigation.

Third, this research focuses on a single country when, in fact, many of the brands identified and evaluated by the study's respondents are global. Global brands would be interested in managing the effects of brand rejection across countries. While self-brand connection and partner quality were identified as key links in the CBBE process for consumers to reject or accept brands in the UK, there is no evidence to suggest that these are, indeed, the 'weakest links' in other countries. Future research should, therefore, aim to replicate this work in other national and cultural contexts.

It would also be interesting to collect data to see if a similar process initiates the deterioration of the overall CBBE for brands that initially had a high overall CBBE score and researchers in the future might want to examine this process. The reasons that drove the negativity towards the brands and the time frame of specific incidents can also be considered in future studies, as they could influence the formation of the overall CBBE.

The data was collected adopting existing scales that were used in the past to examine the phenomenon for the most favorite brands (Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2016, 2019). Although this approach allows the comparison of the results and helps in drawing conclusions on the similarities between the ways to handle brands with high and low CBBE, one can argue that different operationalization of the constructs could affect the results and future research could approach the constructs as multi-dimensional or operationalized with more items to examine the stability of these findings.

Appendix 1. The Study's measures

Constructs	Items
BRAND HERITAGE	This is a brand whose history is important. This brand has a long history
BRAND PERSONALITY	This brand has been around for a long time. This brand has a strong personality. This brand has a distinct personality.
BRAND NOSTALGIA	I can describe this brand with adjectives I would use to describe a person. This brand reminds me of things I have done or places I have been. This brand reminds me of a certain period of my life.
BRAND PERCEIVED QUALITY	This brand is good quality This brand has excellent features Compared to other brands in its category, this brand is of very high quality.
BRAND LEADERSHIP	This brand is a leading brand in its category. This brand is leading its category This brand tends to outperform its competitors.
BRAND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE	This brand has a clear advantage over competitive brands There is a distinct benefit from using this brand over other brands This brand is superior to other brands in its category
BRAND AWARENESS	I have heard of this brand I am quite familiar with this brand I can recognize this brand among other brands.
BRAND ASSOCIATIONS	This brand has strong associations This brand has favorable associations It is clear what this brand stands for
BRAND REPUTATION	This brand is highly regarded This brand has status This brand has a good reputation
BRAND-SELF CONNECTION	This brand and I have lots in common This brand reminds me of who I am
PARTNER QUALITY	This brand has always been good to me This brand treats me as important and valuable customer/user
BRAND INTIMACY	I really empathize with this brand It feels like I know this brand for a long time
BRAND TRUST	This brand delivers what it promises This brand's product claims are believable This brand has a name you can trust
BRAND RELEVANCE	This brand is relevant to my family and/or close friends This brand fits my lifestyle This brand has personal relevance to me

OVERALL BRAND EQUITY

It makes sense to buy this brand instead of any other brand, even if they are the same
 Even if another brand has the same features as this, I would prefer to buy this brand
 If there is another brand as good as this, I prefer to buy this brand
 If another brand is not different from this in any way, it seems smarter to purchase/use this one

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