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## **Online brand community within the integrated marketing communication system: When chocolate becomes seductive like a person**

Veronica Gabrielli<sup>1\*</sup>, Ilaria Baghi

### **Abstract**

This study proposes brand communities as an effective tool within the integrated marketing communication (IMC) system. The paper utilizes the Brand Concept Map quali-quantitative technique in order to represent and compare mental association texture within one group of non-members of a brand community versus one group of people engaged in the same community. Brand stimulus is Nutella (chocolate cream) which boasts a crowded and lively online brand community: Nutellaville. Results show that brand community is effective in terms of contribution, commonality, and complementarity within the IMC system. In particular, Nutella brand image within the online community participants is composed of some mental associations overlapping other communication tools (commonality), and by new mental associations (complementarity) referred to the brand image dimension named ‘brand as person’ (seductive, popular, reassuring); second, this anthropomorphism effect solves the issue of sense of guilt excited by chocolate (contribution).

**Keywords:** online communications; brand image; brand community; IMC; Nutella

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## Introduction

Companies have a wide range of communication options at their disposal in order to promote their brands. In particular, the Internet and new technologies are rapidly changing the way firms interact and communicate with consumers. Yet, it is unclear how brands can or should be managed in the modern interactive marketplace (Keller 2009).

Unquestionably, although advertising is usually a crucial element of a marketing communications program in this new interactive scenario, its effectiveness is decreasing (Kaplan Thaler and Koval 2003; Pendleton 2004). As a result, marketers are adopting a more varied communication mix than ever before including sales promotions, events, public relations, direct marketing, interactive marketing, word-of-mouth marketing and personal selling, besides the traditional mass advertising (Kotler and Keller 2009). Several authors state that all of the marketing communication options should be integrated to send a consistent message and to positively shape brand equity (Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn 1993; Naik and Raman 2003; Duncan and Mulhern 2004; Naik 2007). From a consumer perspective, marketing communications activities feed brand equity by increasing brand awareness, linking positive strong and unique associations to this brand, eliciting positive cognitive and affective reactions and facilitating brand resonance (Keller 2009). Keller stresses the importance for marketers to ‘mix and match’ communication options, adopting an holistic perspective, by which each option shares common meanings with others, but also offers complementary advantages. In order to do so, companies should adopt a ‘media neutral’ approach to communications, evaluating all the potential activities according to their effectiveness. Marketing research should help marketers to comprehend how each communication option ‘works,’ that is have a major understanding of the range of effects induced by different communication options on consumer brand knowledge and thus its reaction to the brand. The present research constitutes a first exploratory study addressed to shed light on how brand communities ‘work’ in terms of brand image shaping in consumers’ minds. This research makes two contributions.

First, the present research addressed one priority underlined by Keller (2009): to comprehend the role of each type of marketing communication for brand building, in light of the increasing range of marketing communication options employed by marketers. Following Keller suggestion, within an integrated marketing communication (IMC) approach, the attention of the present research is addressed to interactive online activities, as they ‘received less academic scrutiny and study and is exploding with a diverse array of different types of communication activities that were not even available to marketers a mere few years ago’ (Keller 2009, 153). In

particular, we decide to focus our attention on the emerging online brand communities phenomenon.

Second, our investigation mainly observes not-behavioral effects of consumer exposure to an online brand community. We intend to fill a gap in the existing literature investigation on brand communities, which only considers the behavioral effects of the community participation, overtaking the importance for each communication option to establish and to maintain a strong, positive and unique brand perception in order to reach consumers' behavioral resonance.

### **Brand communities within integrated marketing communication**

The context of marketing communication has changed dramatically in recent years, resulting in new opportunities to companies to establish and manage their brands (Keller 2009). This challenge imposes on marketers to mix and match different communication options to reach the desired awareness and image in the consumer's mind. In particular, interactive marketing communications constitute a very interesting alternative, thanks to its versatility. Within new online opportunities, brand communities are becoming more and more diffused.

In the definition of McAlexander, a brand community is a 'structured set of relationships among people who are keen on a brand' (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). Among the relationships that make up this texture, there are links that combine actors with different roles: firms towards clients, clients towards clients, and, in a perspective of anthropomorphism of the brand, also the brand–consumer or product–consumer links.

The objectives of the brand community tend to be both functional and hedonistic and experiential, inasmuch as the user members, united by shared values incarnated by a brand or by similar consumption experiences, seek consensus on the space, protection, dialogue, knowledge, emotional support, and affective links (Morandin 2006).

Hence, it is expected that in the life of the community, the universe of significances and suggestions connected with a brand will expand and consolidate in the mind of its consumers much more swiftly and effectively than with other opportunities for communication and contact. In this perspective, the brand community can become a sort of 'laboratory' for constructing the brand image in the eyes of the consumers (Kim et al. 2008). Keller (2009) underlines that a brand community as an interactive marketing communication option is able to impact on several aspects of the brand equity, particularly in terms of imagery. It can help in building several imagery point-of-parity and point-of-difference in comparison to competitors, and it can convey rich accounts of heritage, experiences and story-telling which shape brand personality by its tone and creative

content. Despite this opportunity, scholars and companies dedicate only a partial attention to this communication option.

Although several firms have understood the potentials of brand communities as effective and inexpensive communication tools, and afford them specific virtual (Internet sites) or real (events and meetings) space and places of aggregation, a large number of them continue to be skeptical with regard to the concrete use of this tool. Management often seems worried, maintaining that to immerse oneself in these social textures may expose the firm to the risk of losing control of its own communication activities. This attitude stems from a unilateral approach to communication by the firm, according to which the consumer is still viewed as a passive element subject to the initiatives performed by the economic actors.

In contrast, the brand community presupposes a different attitude, consistent with a dialogic approach to communication (Smith et al. 2007; Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007).

In this view, the brand must not be an external, detached observer but, rather, should play an active role in the dialogue. In this relational perspective, the role of the consumer also changes: they become protagonists, not only as potential purchasers but, first and foremost, as social beings who live embedded in the experiential texture that accumulates around the brand, thanks to the community (Cova 2003).

As regards scholars, they are involved in understanding the formation and aggregation mechanism of the brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Kilambi, Laroche, and Richard 2013), the basic motivations that drive towards aggregation around a brand (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Casalo', Flavia'n, and Guinali'u 2008) and the role of variables such as brand attachment and brand engagement (Brodie et al. 2013) in the aggregation process. Little attention is paid to the investigation on the effects of the brand community participation; most contributes are focused only on behavioral effect (Won-Moo, Kwang- Ho, and Minsung 2011; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Yeh and Choi 2011; Marzocchi, Morandin, and Bergami 2013). No contributions in the literature investigate how these behavioral effects of community participation on consumers form, that is if brand communities induce a mere short-term effect or if they are able to significantly alter the perception of the brand image.

The present paper constitutes a first attempt to better frame brand communities within an IMC perspective, aiming at giving either a theoretical or a managerial contribution. Specifically the intent is to investigate the singular effects of the participation in online brand community, considered as an IMC proper tool, on shaping consumers' perception of the brand.

Following Keller's (2009) demand for a deeper understanding of how interactive marketing communications 'work,' we start from the framework of IMC at a micro and macro perspective.

Keller (1993, 2001) lists six factors which need to be considered in managing communication mix: coverage, contribution, commonality, complementarity, versatility, and costs. Coverage, robustness, and costs are structural properties related to communication options (that is the number and typologies of people reachable with this tool, and by which level of investments), while contribution, commonality, and complementarity are aspects related to contents. For this reason, our attention has been particularly addressed to them.

Contribution expresses the ability of a communication tool to generate a singular effect on consumers, in the absence of exposure to any other communication option.

Commonality relates to the ability of a communication option to share common meanings with other activities, that is to stress and reinforce specific contents.

Complementarity refers to the ability of a communication option to carry different meanings of the same brand in comparison with other communication alternatives.

A great IMC system should ‘mix and match’ options that are mutually compensatory and reinforcing to establish consumer knowledge structures (Keller 2009).

The purpose of the study is to explore how a brand community is able to act within the IMC plan, that is to shed light on its contribution, commonality, and complementarity properties.

As suggested by the IMC paradigm, modern marketing communication is based on the increasing importance of the relational approach (Keller 2009; Jankovic 2012), that does not take into account only the satisfaction of consumer needs, but the realization of long-term communication relationship with them. So far, no studies analyze the effect of the relational approach on consumers’ perception of the brand image, although scholars state that the developing brand identity refers to the importance of relational communications tools, such as online brand community, for the purpose of creating and establishing stronger emotional connection with the consumer (Cova 2003). In this perspective, the added value of the online brand community tools is convincing and realistic, but no evidence of its efficacy on consumers’ brand perception has been shown. From the theoretical point of view, the intent of the present paper is to begin to fill some gaps regarding the lack of analysis of the effect of the attendance of an online community on consumers’ perception of a brand image. This purpose replies both to a theoretical and a managerial need to understand potentialities of such a growing and interesting communication option.

Our exploratory research questions are the following:

- (a) Are brand communities a communication option able to shape brand image?
- (b) Which kind of properties do brand communities have within the IMC structure in terms of contribution, commonality and complementarity?

## Methodology

The general purpose of this research is to understand if and how a brand community is effective in altering brand image structure.

As argued by Keller (1993), understanding the value of a brand necessitates starting from the analysis of the mental associations that characterize and describe that brand in the memory of the consumers (brand image). These elements may therefore be recalled to the mind of the consumers when they think of the brand in question, and express a more or less direct link with it, plus with all the other mental associations (Anderson 1973). The network of concepts that describes the perceived image of the brand can serve as an ideal tool for the firm to measure the effectiveness of its marketing communications. While Keller in his customer-based brand equity pyramid gives only a general description of brand image as one of the six blocks of the resonance pyramid, Aaker (1995, 1997) focuses his attention on this construct and he identifies four different dimensions: the brand as a product, as a firm, as a symbol, and as a person. From a conceptual point of view, the present study adopts Aaker's brand image framework. In order to understand the impact of brand community participation in brand image shaping in consumers' mind, we performed a comparison between two groups of consumers: the one was exposed to traditional media and not to the brand community; the other one was exposed both to traditional media and to the brand community. Then we compared the brand conceptual maps between these two groups in order to highlight the differential effect induced by this communication option within the IMC system.

From a methodological point of view, the techniques employed for measuring brand conceptual maps representing brand image are yet to be significantly developed. The literature features several examples of methodologies, whether quantitative (Henderson, Iacobucci, and Calder 1998) or qualitative (Zaltman and Coulter 1995), but there is a substantial agreement in the literature to support the idea that the personification of a brand is still seen as being accessible for researchers more through qualitative than through quantitative means (Davies and Chun 2003). Recently, a technique of analysis has emerged: the Brand Concept Map (Roedder et al. 2006). This methodology is employed for this study. It enables one to map the mental associations relating to the brand by melding the depth of qualitative analysis with the possibility of obtaining solid aggregated structures without recourse to quantitative methods not widely diffused among marketing practitioners. The Brand Concept Map provides for three stages: elicitation stage, mapping stage and aggregation stage (Roedder et al. 2006). The brand Nutella was chosen because, apart from its emotional vocation hedonistic involvement feature, it was felt to be suitable owing to a number of characteristics: it is a well-known brand in Italy, unmistakably attributed to a product,

with the possibility to remind one easily of the producer firm, plus it is the protagonist of an articulate, active online community: Nutellaville.

According to Cova and Pace (2006), Nutella is probably nowadays the most worldwide famous hazelnut cream brand. It holds 90% of the cream market in Italy and can be found in 14 million households, with an annual per capita consumption reaching 800 g, becoming real cultural consumption phenomenon (Cova and Pace 2006). The brand Nutella is nowadays present in the hazelnut cream market of 32 countries, including the USA, Japan and Australia, with a strong global positioning. Nutella is one of the 10 most valuables in the global market with a financial value of 1.26 million dollars (Interbrand Branding Studies 2013). The brand Nutella owns all the characteristics that the literature recognizes as the essentials required to give life to a brand community of consumers: it has an hedonistic and emotional vocation, such as the enjoyable and seductive recall of the chocolate (Cova 2003); it is a distinctive brand, no competitors have the same strong identification in consumer mind (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002); it celebrates a peculiar lifestyle value (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), such as 'the charm of simple pleasure' and it boasts decades of history, it was born in 1946 (Cova 2003). In 2006, Nutella founded its own web community, 'MyNutella' (Cova and Pace 2006), which becomes in few years a very active community of 24,346 members and in 2009 changed its name to 'Nutellaville.' The site currently looks like a small town where every member can buy Nutella products at the 'Piazza del mercato,' visit the 'Nutella Art Gallery' where every member is free to upload their picture with Nutella or enjoy the brand advertising museum. In the 'Ristorante,' all the members can exchange and suggest Nutella-based recipes and in the 'Cinema' they can watch video in the Nutella Tv. Finally, the 'Nutella news' section provides members all the information they should be aware of related to events, promotion, or contests. Within this interactive small town, the brand Nutella opens a lot of possibilities for their community members to create a strong relationship with the brand and with other consumers sharing contents and adding new meanings to the brand.

This technique of brand mapping was applied (Roedder et al. 2006) in the service context in the case of the Mayo Clinic, and in the context of tangible products to the Lipton Ice Tea brand (Brandt and De Mortanges 2006). In both cases, the authors employed the technique to compare the mental map of the habitual consumers or users of the brand with the map of those who have no experience of consumption or service with it. This reveals the ability of the tool to depict the differences existing in the perception of one who is a loyal consumer as against that of one who has had only superficial contact with the brand. Consistent with the Brand Concept Map methodology, the present study was performed in three distinct stages.



***Stage 1: Elicitation of the mental associations with the brand***

In this stage, two focus groups were organized: one comprised six persons alien to the online brand community and the other consisted of six persons who had taken part in Nutellaville.

The aim of this first stage was to collect a list of mental associations shared by the participants in each focus. The main stimulus supplied was the question ‘What are the first things that come to mind when you think of Brand X?’, then going on to deal with more introspective, anecdotal aspects, and social experience connected with the Nutella brand. Ex-post, from the textual analysis of the two sessions of group work, we extrapolated the list of words that would be proposed in the next stage of the study.

***Stage 2: Articulation of the individual mental maps referring to the brand***

In this second stage, the list of associations with the Nutella brand was submitted to 60 people willing to take part in the research without any form of reward. Two groups of subjects were identified: 30 subjects were chosen and recruited within the members of the community and other 30 were chosen among Nutella consumers. Each of the participants in the two groups was asked to compose graphically their own brand map. A central porthole bearing the name Nutella acted as the central node, and the subject was asked to position nearest to it the words directly and strongly linked with the brand, while the more distant spaces were destined for the words referring indirectly or more weakly to the brand.

The technique of Brand Concept Map entails inserting new associations if these should emerge in more than 4% of the respondents, thus increasing the list of words submitted to the subsequent participants. Lastly, each respondent was asked to supply sociodemographic data and information about her/his relationship with Nutella and the Nutella website.

***Stage 3: Construction of the map of the two consensus maps on the brand and comparison***

The third stage was performed by confronting the group of non-members of the online community and that of the members and vice versa. For each group, a data-set was constructed containing the numerical expression of the maps drawn by the respondents.

For each brand association, we identified the frequency of the expression cited as first degree association, i.e., directly linked to the central node of the brand, or second degree (indirect link), as well as the intensity of links around it, i.e., the number of associations recalled by it (subordinate) and the number of associations from which the recall to memory of it (superordinate) stemmed. Consistent with the requirements of the Brand Concept Map, a mental association is important

when it expresses a direct, strong link with the brand or when, even if not closely linked, it is the fulcrum of a multitude of other secondary associations.

On the basis of these data, we selected as belonging to the consensus map only the associations having the following characteristics: they were cited by at least 50% of the respondents or were cited by a percentage of 40–49% provided that they had a number of links above the average of links present for the associations cited at least by the majority.

Lastly, the two mental maps of the Nutella brand were compared in such a way as to highlight the particular features of each one, in order to highlight the effects of participation in the online brand community in the mental structure of the brand image.

## **Results**

### ***Stage 1: Elicitation of the mental associations with the brand***

The first stage of the study aimed to identify the set of mental associations attributed to the brand in question. Table 1 lists all the mental associations which emerged in the context of the two focus groups. Overall, 68 associations were recorded. The items in bold type in the table report the associations made by both groups. We decided to represent the associations in a single list since, consistently with the method of Brand Concept Map, the associations which emerged in the two focus groups would then be united to make up the list from which the respondents would be able to select the items to insert in the personal conceptual map.

### ***Stage 2: construction of the individual mental maps referring to the brand***

Analysis of the results of stage 2 enabled us, firstly, to detect a good variety in terms of age bands and consumption habits in the two samples of study (e.g., in each group, about 20% consume Nutella 1–2 times per year and a further 20% are assiduous users of the product).

As against that, the two groups were contrasted by the substantial difference in terms of media contact with the Nutella brand: the first group consisted of 30 persons who have never had contact with the Nutella site; the second comprised people who have frequented the online community: the 30 subjects interviewed were expressly asked to attend the community, unless they were already members, and to pay frequent daily visits to the site in the subsequent month. The 60 maps obtained in this second stage of analysis were then aggregated, in order to provide shared maps of each group, i.e., participants in the online community and non-participants. Table 2 contains all the data on the basis of which the selection was made, for the group of strangers to the online community.

Table 1. List of elicited mental associations referring to the Nutella brand.

<b>'BAD FOR YOU' HABIT</b>	<b>BREAKFAST KNIFE</b>	<b>FAT TASTE</b>	<b>PAST PIN-UP</b>
<b>FRIENDS</b>	<b>BIRTHDAY</b>	<b>IN COMPANY</b>	<b>POPULAR</b>
<b>ANTI-STRESS</b>	<b>PANCAKES</b>	<b>CHILDHOOD</b>	<b>AFFORDABLE PRICE</b>
<b>CONTENTMENT</b>	<b>SPOONFULS</b>	<b>FATTENING</b>	<b>REASSURING</b>
<b>ITALIAN SOCCER TEAM</b>	<b>COOK</b>	<b>INIMITABLE</b>	<b>RECIPES</b>
<b>BAGUETTE</b>	<b>BY ONESELF</b>	<b>IRREPLACEABLE</b>	<b>MEMORIES</b>
<b>CHILDREN</b>	<b>HIDING</b>	<b>ITALY</b>	<b>RED</b>
<b>JAR</b>	<b>FINGERS</b>	<b>KINDER</b>	<b>SAVOURY</b>
<b>JAR FOR COLLECTING</b>	<b>BAN</b>	<b>TONGUE</b>	<b>SEDUCTIVE</b>
<b>BISCUITS</b>	<b>ENERGY</b>	<b>MUM</b>	<b>SENSE OF GUILT</b>
<b>PIMPLES</b>	<b>SUMMER</b>	<b>BROWN</b>	<b>SPORT</b>
<b>TOOTH DECAY</b>	<b>EUROPE</b>	<b>TEATIME</b>	<b>TIGELLE</b>
<b>HOME</b>	<b>FAMILY</b>	<b>NANNI MORETTI</b>	<b>CAKE</b>
<b>WHAT WOULD THE WORLD BE WITHOUT NUTELLA?</b>	<b>HARMING ONESELF</b>	<b>NUTELLA WITH...</b>	<b>HOLIDAY</b>
<b>CHOCOLATES</b>	<b>FERRERO</b>	<b>NUTELLA PARTY</b>	<b>SINGLE- PORTION JAR</b>
<b>HUGS</b>	<b>SLICE OF BREAD</b>	<b>PASS THE WORD</b>	<b>VELVETY</b>

Table 2. Centrality and intensity of citation of the principal associations: group of non-members of the community.

	Citation (%)	% of citation as 1st order association	No. of interconnections	No. of subordinates	No. of superordinates
CHILDHOOD	66.7	40.0	1.61	0.11	0.84
TEATIME	60.0	30.0	2.15	0.75	1.63
SLICE OF BREAD	60.0	20.0	2.15	0.50	1.50
FATEENING	53.3	30.0	1.92	0.75	0.69
IRREPLACEABLE	53.3	33.3	1.38	0.31	0.81
BIRTHDAY	53.3	3.3	1.12	0.13	1.00
FRIENDS	53.3	23.3	2.12	1.13	1.00
CONTENTMENT	53.3	10.0	1.59	0.56	1.06
FERRERO	50.0	30.0	1.25	0.20	0.53
CHOCOLATE	46.6	23.3	2.85	1.71	0.93
SENSE OF GUILT	60.0	23.3	2.61	1.06	1.55
CHILDREN	46.6	23.3	2.00	0.86	1.14
ANTI-STRESS	43.3	16.7	2.46	1.38	1.08
WHAT WOULD THE WORLD BE WITHOUT NUTELLA?	43.3	33.3	2.92	2.08	1.00

**Stage 3: Construction of the map of the two consensus maps on the brand and comparison**

The data reported above enabled us to identify the associations around which a general consensus was detected. The list of these associations was translated into a graphic picture, in the form of a map, according to the following criteria (Roedder et al. 2006): the first order associations were those which, if cited, were mainly located by the respondents in direct contact with the central node, the brand. By comparing the percentage of citations as first order association with respect to citations as second order association for each word, it was possible to identify the order to assign it in the summary map.

In order to identify the links between associations, we calculated a bivariate correlation between the individual variables: the associations were linked if they showed a correlation between them with index Sig < 0.05.

From this emerged the map given in Figure 1, which may therefore be considered as summarizing the Nutella image found in the group of non-members of the online brand community.

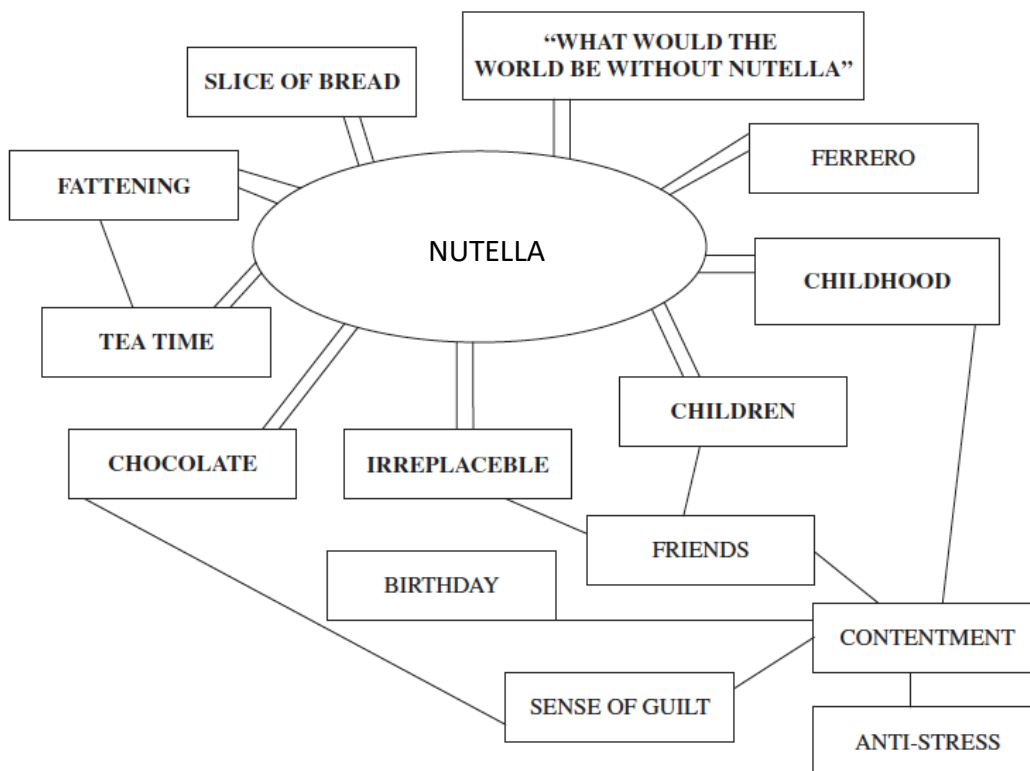


Figure 1. Map of the Nutella brand image in the group of non-members of the community.

The map displays the variety of mental associations identified by the non-members of the online community. To be noted, firstly, is the large number of these associations: overall, there are 14 information nodes on which a general consensus was achieved, 9 of which were held to be first order, i.e., closely interconnected with the central node, the brand. The respondents therefore found it fairly easy to call to mind words referring to the brand. Somewhat less easy was the ability to identify links between the various words.

Indeed, the interconnections between the first and second degree associations are less frequent in the above map. Different first degree associations have no words subordinate to them in terms of a capacity to recall to mind. Calculating the average number of interconnections of the associations included in the map, we get a value of 1.97.

As regards the second sample of references, Table 3 and Figure 2 display the principal results emerging from the analysis of the Nutella image in the group of online community members. The consensus map was constructed according to the same criteria and stages performed for the aforementioned group of non-members.

Table 3. Centrality and intensity of citation of the principal associations: group of community members.

	Citation (%)	% of citation as 1st order association	No. of interconnections	No. of subordinates	No. of superordinates
CONTENTMENT	70.0	16.7	2.43	1.10	1.00
INIMITABLE	70.0	36.7	3.19	2.19	1.00
ANTI-STRESS	66.7	23.3	2.60	1.50	1.10
SPOONFULS	63.3	3.3	1.26	0.21	1.05
POPULAR	63.3	30.0	2.95	1.89	1.05
FINGERS	60.0	0.0	1.11	0.11	1.0
TASTE	60.0	23.3	2.47	1.37	1.11
FRIENDS	50.0	40.0	1.86	0.87	1.00
HUGS	50.0	26.7	3.33	2.33	1.00
BY ONESELF	50.0	0.0	1.20	0.13	1.07
MEMORIES	50.0	13.3	2.00	0.93	1.07
REASSURING	46.7	13.3	2.21	1.21	1.00
SEDUCTIVE	46.7	30.0	3.71	2.71	1.00
FATTENING	43.3	20.0	2.54	1.46	1.08

The consensus map of the members of the online community is composed of a number of associations equal to that of the non-members. The number of first order associations is smaller (6 vs. 9 in the other group), but the number of interconnections is appreciably larger. The links in which each association of the map is involved total on average 2.40.

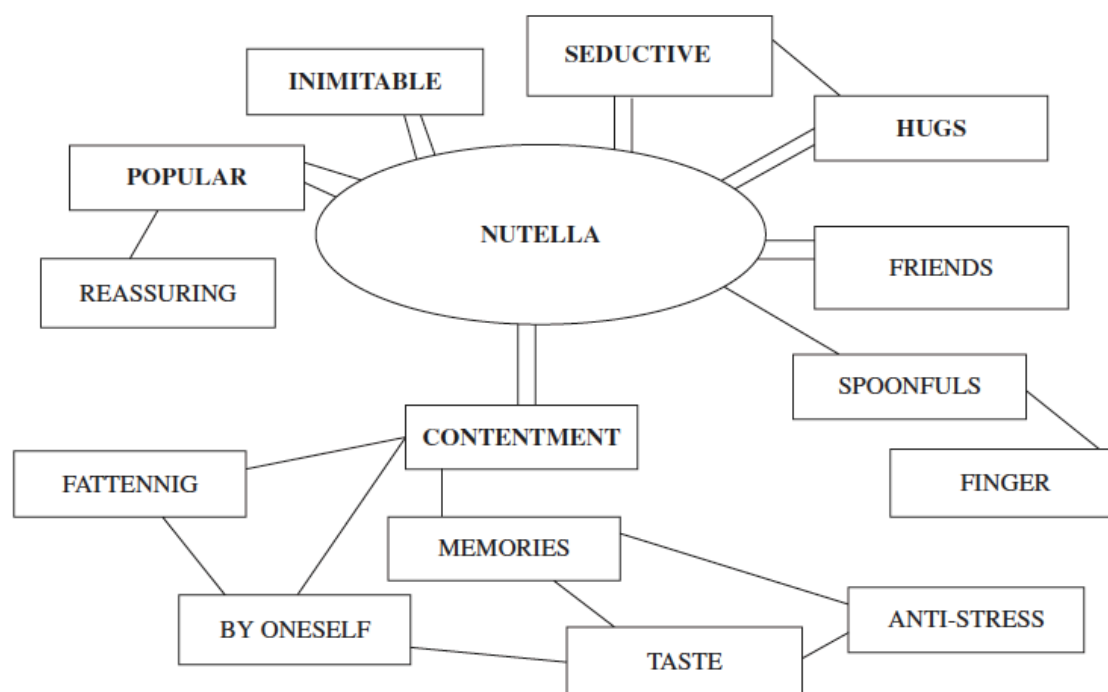


Figure 2. Map of the Nutella brand image in the group of members of the community.

Further considerations on the comparison between the results recorded in the two groups could be made, going in detail into the differences in citation emerging in the respective stages of analysis (Table 4).

Note, first, how there are four associations common to each group: friends, contentment, anti-stress, and fattening. In the members of the online brand community, some dimensions are replaced with the prevalent aspects of a personal and emotional character. Likewise, comparing the values recorded for the individual associations, we find that in the group of online community members, there is a greater uniformity of views. Indeed, certain words reach fairly high citation percentages, up to 70%.

Some interesting points emerge from the above results. Reading the conceptual maps obtained according to the interpretative scheme proposed by Aaker (1997), i.e., the fourfold division of the brand image into the following dimensions: product, person, symbol, and organization, the associations that emerged can be arranged fairly comfortably in line with this brand image model, confirming the ability of brand community as an effective communication tool in shaping brand image. The sphere of the product strongly recall aspects cited by Aaker's model, such as the modes of use of the product (e.g., slice of bread, knife, and so on) or the occasions of use (birthday, breakfast,

teatime), or the ingredients (chocolate). Likewise, the recalls to the dimension of brand as firm are fairly clear: the Ferrero business brand, the Europe-wide acquaintance with the brand and so on. With regard to the iconographic aspects, recalled by the dimension of brand as symbol, note the presence of the logo colors (brown, red) and the claim in the advertising campaigns of recent years ('what would the world be without Nutella').

Table 4. Comparison between the citations emerging in the member and non-member groups of the brand community.

	% of citation of group of members of the community	% of citation of group of non-members of the community
ANTI-STRESS	66.7	43.3
BIRTHDAY	26.7*	53.3*
BY ONESELF	50.0*	23.3*
CHILDHOOD	23.3*	66.7*
CHILDREN	26.7*	46.6*
CHOCOLATE	23.3*	46.6*
CONTENTMENT	70.0	53.3
FATTENING	43.3	53.3
FERRERO	6.60*	50.0*
FINGERS	60.0*	23.3*
FRIENDS	50.0	53.3
HUGS	50.0*	13.3*
INIMITABLE	70.0*	6.60*
IRREPLACEABLE	13.3*	53.3*
MEMORIES	50.0*	23.3*
POPULAR	63.3*	26.7*
REASSURING	46.7*	23.3*
SEDUCTIVE	46.7*	3.30*
SENSE OF GUILT	46.6*	60.0*
SLICE OF BREAD	36.7*	60.0*
SPOONFULS	63.3*	36.7*
TASTE	60.0*	36.6*
TEATIME	26.7*	60.0*
WHAT WOULD THE WORLD BE WITHOUT NUTELLA	36.6*	43.3*

\*Statistically significant difference (Chi-square  $p < .05$ ).

The strength of this slogan, confirmed over the years, stamps it in the memory of the respondents much more than color elements of visual identity of the brand. Indeed, the brown and red of the Nutella logo record appreciably lower citation percentages, 33.4% for the first and 13.3% for the second. Lastly, with regard to the dimension of brand as person, human characteristics attributed to the brand emerge (seductive, reassuring, pinup, and so on) as well as elements evoking a relationship with the brand (memories, habit, childhood, and so on).

The comparison between participants and non-participants in the brand community are particularly interesting in terms of the composition by quality of associations called to mind, thus

they are useful in identifying which kind of impact brand community is able to play in respect to other communication activities (in terms of commonality, contribution, and complementarity).

The four mental associations overlapping members and non-members represent the domain of commonality, that is those meanings that are expressed by several communication tools. For these associations, brand community represents a reinforcement potential.

Besides this important result, the comparison between members and non-members of the online community revealed very interesting contributive and complementary potentialities due to brand communities. In particular, non-members in respect to members not only differ for single brand associations, but rather they differ remarkably in brand image structure.

In the brand image of the online community members, firm and symbol dimensions are lighter, both on behalf of product and person dimensions. References to the firm are lacking: Ferrero disappears from the list of shared associations. This evidence is worth considering, since it seems to suggest that membership of the online community ‘distances,’ in the perceptive sense, the brand from the firm, on behalf of a human-centric perspective. This suggests that the experience within the online community is able to ‘humanize’ a brand that becomes, in the first place, a person, an entity to which to apply (anthropomorphism), and thus not merely an emanation of a firm.

The iconographic dimension of the brand is also absent within online community members: no shared appeal to the color aspects of the brand, and not even to the claim ‘What world would it be without Nutella,’ while they appeared in the non-members’ concept map. The advertising centrality disappears. Moreover, within the members of the online community, the product dimension is present in a different way with respect to the group of non-members of the online community. It is the aspect of uniqueness of Nutella, i.e., its invulnerability as against competing products, that is selected among the words offered to the respondents; no longer the descriptive elements of the product (ingredients, use contexts). Already the product dimension is connoted in an experiential way.

It is in the person dimension that the most interesting contributive and complementary brand community role results manifest. Online community members seem to adopt a different perspective when looking at Nutella. Selecting the most prominent mental association related to this brand, they reveal a sort of anthropomorphized vision of the Nutella brand. Nutella is described according to features belonging to personality (reassuring, seductive), one of which (seductive) is included among the first order associations. Moreover, the dimension of brand as person is undoubtedly the one that exhibits a greater associative density among first and second order associations.

Then, alongside the individual respondent, we find the appeal to other persons with whom the experience can be shared: the word ‘friends’ also becomes a first order association, signifying to



what extent the social dimension of experience in the online community is pervasive. Friends are also those with whom opinions, experiences and advice have been shared within the social online network. This aspect of social context brings out the characteristic of popularity of the Nutella brand, indicated by the respondents as first order association.

The image that emerges from the online community members is much more personal, almost intimate and shared, whereas for those who have never visited the online community, it is far more passive and related to others. Effectively the non member of the online community build the brand image only through the stimuli they receives unilaterally from the firm: the color connected with the name (33.3% among nonmembers, falling to 3.3% in the community members), the use contexts proposed in the publicity (birthday records 53.3% vs. 6.7%); and related to others since it tends to project consumption of the product on other subjects, typically children (46.4% vs. 16.7% of citations by community members). The image found among the online community members, however, has the consumer as protagonist in constructing the brand meaning. Along with their own memories (50% of citations by community members vs. 23% among non-members), it shares the brand meaning with other persons.

As Fioroni and Titterton (2009) argue, every brand, like a person, has a proper and unique character ‘which configure its ways of conducting relationships’ (p. 39), and this is the reason why consumers are able to establish relationships with a brand (friendship, trust, confidence, dependence, solace) that go beyond the simple act of consumption (Fournier 1998). Recent marketing literature introduced the concept of brand anthropomorphism. It has been defined as the tendency to attribute human-like characteristics, intentions, and behavior to non-human objects (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007; Epley et al. 2008; Brown 2010). The anthropomorphism of the brand Nutella – described within online community members as seductive, popular, and reassuring – can be considered an effective goal of marketing strategy and has an impact on perceived credibility of the brand (Keller 2001), on consumer–brand relationship (Fournier 1998), and on the consumers’ evaluation of the brand or the product (Kim and McGill 2010).

Moreover, this relational frame has significant effects on the emotions linked with the brand. The great relevance given by brand community members to the image of the brand as a person leads to another positive effect on brand image: to reduce the ambivalence of the Nutella product. In particular, brand community participation reduces the obstacles between itself and the brand (the sense of guilt falls from 60% to 33.3%; price sensitivity drops from 23.3% to 6.7%). In addition, the emotional sphere of the brand community members presents uniquely positive traits (contentment, anti-stress) and climbs to primary rank: contentment is the first order association or the one having

the greatest ramification of underlying interconnections. The negative state of mind found among the mental associations of the non-members of the online community (sense of guilty) disappears entirely from the map of the members. The fact that Nutella is seen as popular, hence accessible to all, ductile, and famous as a person within brand community members helps to mitigate the state of tension after consumption, to the point where Nutella is felt to be reassuring. In the marketplace, a consumer can find a lot of products that potentially could induce mixed emotion. One of the clearest examples is chocolate. Chocolate is the food most frequently craved (Roger and Smit 2000). Eating chocolate can boost positive emotional states (Hill and Heaton-Brown 1994), but these feelings may be accompanied by simultaneous increases in negative emotions, particularly guilt (Macht and Dettmer 2006), due to the stigma associated with unrestrained over-indulgence of chocolate (Roger and Smit 2000).

In the light of these considerations, the research takes on further interest – demonstrating that active membership of the online brand community reduces this ambivalence in favor of the more positive aspects connected with the brand experience, thus positing the community as an effective tool for resolving the said ambivalence. The tension between positive states of mind, such as contentment and anti-stress relief, and negative ones, such as the sense of guilt at having consumed something hyper-caloric, is evident from the associative link between the words connected with the emotional sphere within the non-members of the brand community. This aspect of emotional ambivalence encapsulates one of the most significant findings of this study, following the comparison between the members and the non-members of the online brand community.

### **Theoretical contribution**

This research offers several theoretical contributions within the debate on the appropriate perspective looking at new communication challenges.

First, the present research contributes to shed light on the role of one of the emerging online interactive communication tool: the brand community. This result starts from the consideration that the marketing communication context has changed drastically in recent years, resulting in new opportunities for companies to establish and manage their brands. Despite the growing importance given to interactive communication options, scholars have devoted very little effort to comprehend how to interpret interactive communication options within the IMC system (Keller 2009). This study carries this challenge, focusing the attention on online brand communities. The choice to devote a specific analysis on a particular communication option is addressed to verify the validity of Keller's perspective of IMC including a modern communication tools. As a matter of fact, this research confirms the existence of commonality, contribution, and complementarity within the

Integrated Communication Mix. The overlapping mental association between non-members and members of the online brand community constitute the essence of the commonality property, while the distinctive mental associations derive from the complementarity and contribution properties.

Second, this research confirms the importance to adopt a relational approach in analyzing the modern marketing communication. Several authors suggest the importance to refresh the IMC paradigm in a relational way (Jankovic 2012; Cova 2003).

Notwithstanding this, very poor investigations have been addressed to explore the importance of below the line communication activities based on consumers' participation. The context of analysis (a online brand community) appears particularly appropriate to investigate relational outputs, as it is a many-to-many emerging communication option by which people freely interact in order to establish a common-sense related to the brand, and by which each consumer is able to directly interact with the brand. Findings strongly highlight the specific ability of the online brand community to differently shape consumer perception of the brand, even consistent to an anthropomorphism perspective (Aggarwal and McGill 2007).

Third, stressing the importance to analyze the effects of brand community participation on brand image, the present research overtakes the existing knowledge about brand communities, focused on brand community's participation antecedents (Casalo', Flavia'n, and Guinali'u 2008), or on consumer interaction dynamics within online brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Kilambi, Laroche, and Richard 2013) or on behavioral effects of a brand community participation (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Arnould 2009; Won-Moo, Kwang-Ho, and Minsung 2011; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Yeh and Choi 2011; Marzocchi, Morandin, and Bergami 2013). The theoretical contribution of this research in this field is to stress the existence of relevant relational and emotional effects due to a brand community exposure. These effects are interesting because findings show that one of the distinctive brand community properties is to be able to neutralize negative emotions potentially linked to a product, as chocolate ambivalence.

### **Conclusions and managerial implications**

The present research focuses on brand community option, investigating one of the most popular brands in the world: Nutella. The main purpose was to explore how brand community challenge might play an appropriate role in the total marketing communications program. The premise was that marketers, in making their choices, must make sure that, in a micro sense, their interactive marketing initiatives are effective and efficient in isolation (namely 'contribution property'), but in a macro sense they might along with other communication activities be reinforcing common

meanings (namely ‘commonality property’) and introducing new mental associations (namely ‘complementarity property’).

From the study performed on the two groups of subjects – one outside the online brand community, the other consisting of members – some interesting considerations have emerged on the reflections produced on the perceived image of the brand by the online social network of the brand community in terms of contribution, commonality, and complementarity of this communication option within the IMC system. A great number of interesting results in the mental associations relating to the brand were found, showing the ability of a brand community to generate a different shape and composition of brand image.

First, the members of the online brand community evidenced the presence of four mental associations overlapping with the non-members’ group (people exposed only to different communication options). This is a relevant support to the commonality property of brand communities within the IMC system. However, brand image structure within online brand community members in respect to non-members shows an arrangement of the concepts relating to the brand that was denser and more profound. In particular, consolidation of wide acquaintance sought through an online brand community activity should not lead to a dilution of the image. In the case of this study, this reaction seems not to have occurred. On the contrary, the image appears denser since the texture of connections among the different brand associations is thicker. From a theoretical standpoint, this result confirms Aaker’s assumption: consumers are able to retrieve in memory a limited set of mental associations related to a brand. Communication options do not induce an increasing number of brand associations, but rather more intense linkages among them, differently organized in terms of brand image dimensions.

From a managerial standpoint, this thick texture is undoubtedly a positive result. If consumers have a clear idea of a brand, they can more easily call to mind significances to link with it, and each of these will be able to activate other significances connected with the brand. In the group of online community members, the overall architecture of the brand image is not only denser but also more sharply outlined and more profound, for the connotation of the brand image is made evident by the absence of more superficial dimensions, such as those of product and symbol, on behalf of the anthropomorphic dimension.

The anthropomorphic process induced by brand community is a second theoretically interesting finding of this exploratory analysis. This finding shows a crucial role of complementarity effect due to a brand community activation within the IMC system: this interactive option significantly introduces in consumers’ minds the brand as person dimension.

Within the brand community context, the brand–consumer relationship becomes close and deep as if it is an actual friendship. So the brand community demonstrates an appropriate context in which to observe the transformation of the brand to a person through the social connection and experience of the community life.

This is important from the managerial point of view as well, since the online brand community shows itself capable of imprinting the brand in a stronger way in the minds of people; it enables it to get itself remembered by elements that are more singular and more difficult to imitate, as personal traits. In other words, to link the product components or the colors of the brand with that brand is easy for the majority. Less immediate, and a symptom of greater involvement, is to privilege the expression of product-qualifying characteristics that extend beyond the perceptive sphere or the functional needs. Indeed, in the group of community members, the product moves from a simple spreadable cream, based on chocolate and hazelnuts, to an inimitable product, like a unique person. This is a short but significant step: to declare a product inimitable is synonymous with protection for the brand, and thus with a more proactive attitude on the part of the consumer who, not by chance, finds himself/herself among the members of the community. The online community member would appear to consider the more superficial dimensions as understood. They leave room for deeper associations.

The deep-rootedness of the brand image in the members of the online community is also witnessed by the pervasiveness of the person dimension. The brand is portrayed as an individual, with its own personality traits, with respect to which the consumer's involvement has above all an emotional character.

Lastly, participation in the online brand community seems to play a fundamental role in mitigating the negative states of mind, and therefore in resolving the emotional ambivalence presented by certain brands. Indeed, within online community members, the negative mental association related to guilt disappeared and fattening was downgraded from a first-order association to a second-order one. This is the most relevant theoretical finding in terms of net contribution due to an online brand community on consumers' mental representation.

Such a line might furnish an interesting managerial path along which to develop brands characterized by potential ambivalence. The social network that spontaneously forms has thus the function of a place in which areas of significance favorable to the brand are consolidated. The fear of social sanction or negative personal consequences is neutralized by the effect of complicity and sharing that obtains within the online community. Food products are not the only ones that lend themselves to this positive effect: suffice it to think of the valence this could have for pharmaceutical items, or for brands that evoke a low profile lifestyle (low-cost products).

The online community, then, would seem to be a place where the image becomes more positive, but also more clear-cut and above all more intimate. The consumer takes an active part in constructing the significance of the brand, including the informational nodes connected with it, and even her/his own emotions. Such an involvement objective is undoubtedly sought by many brands that, with actions from many sides, pursue an empathetic approach with the consumer, in search of more stable, more lasting relations.

An example can be found in the way luxury firms try to affiliate their clientele and attract new consumers, removing them from the temptation of counterfeit products.

The findings of this exploratory study may therefore be considered encouraging for firms who intend to exploit a wide range of communication options within their mix, all the more so when one considers that those taking part in this study had contact with the online community for a limited time, that is they are not stable brand community members.

This highlights the positive effect of the life in the community within the IMC system on building brand image, beyond the personal characteristics that attract people towards these communities. In this perspective, the study may serve as a first stimulus for better qualification of the effects produced by different communication options in shaping brand image. It was the intention of our study to contribute to this topic. The stimuli generated by this work could give rise to further analyses, extending them to other brands, in order to verify whether the effects recorded in the specific case are analogous to what occurs for other brand typologies, among them desirable brands, love-marks, or brands linked with problematic products.

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