Building consumer-brand relationships in the channel-mix era. The role of self-brand connection and product involvement.

Abstract

Purpose: In the channel-mix era, the customer journey involves combining channels during all the stages of the decision-making process, such that creating and maintaining relationships with consumers poses a challenge to retailers. This work seeks to explore what role brands play in this issue by analyzing what impact the perceived benefits of brand channel-mix have on consumer self-brand connection (SBC) and what their effect is in enduring consumer-brand relationships (i.e., future channel-mix use and word of mouth (WOM)). This paper also explores the moderating role of product involvement in these relations.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors carried out a personal questionnaire with a sample of 288 consumers who were recruited after leaving one of the stores of a clothing brand that is a successful example of distribution channel management.

Findings: Insofar as consumers perceive channel-mix benefits, SBC will be higher and (or as a result) their future intentions with the brand will be more intense. In addition, the results show that product involvement moderates the relationship between SBC and channel-mix use intention and WOM.

Originality: This work contributes to channel-mix, relationship marketing, brand, and product involvement literature by analyzing how customers may be retained in the channel-mix era through brand management and by considering product category involvement. This study

merges brand and product variables to explore their impact on relationship marketing within channel-mix behaviors.

Keywords

Self-brand connection; channel-mix; relationship marketing; product involvement.

1. Introduction

No two customer journeys are alike –even for the same customer, and complex shopping journeys are becoming the norm. Consumers use channels and devices, both in combination and interchangeably, and expect improved experiences when interacting with brands (Verhoef *et al.*, 2015) (i.e., channel mix context), thereby creating and developing intense relationships with them (Alvarez *et al.*, 2021). Adjusting their strategies to this channel-mix context is not an option for firms; it is a must. Prior research has highlighted the importance of channel-mix management, since consumers who use several channels are more profitable and spend more money in each channel (Sopadjieva *et al.*, 2017). However, despite their efforts, adapting to the channel-mix context remains a challenge for many retailers (Neslin, 2022), who find it difficult to create and maintain relationships with their customers (Cui *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the literature has alerted to the need for more profound research on consumer relationship marketing in this context, and to explore in greater depth how retailers can retain customers (Donthu *et al.,* 2022, Mishra *et al.*, 2021, Nguyen *et al.*, 2022). Scholars have also advocated taking into consideration the role played by brand-consumer interactions when studying channel-mix behaviors, since brands have remained somewhat ignored in this field of research (Neslin *et al.*, 2014, Yin *et al.*, 2022).

Brand-related scholars suggest that if customers perceive that the brand reflects their values and interests, then the connection between the self and the brand will be strengthened (Jin, 2018), which leads them to maintain strong relationships with the brand, since it reflects their

self-concept (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2016). Self-brand connection (SBC) is thus considered critical to maintaining intense relationships, as it contributes to future behavioral intentions such as purchase (Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2022), adoption (Casidy *et al.*, 2021, Tran *et al.*, 2020) or willingness to pay (Nadeem *et al.*, 2023), whilst also enhancing brand equity (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015), loyalty (Lin *et al.*, 2017) or WOM (De Keyzer *et al.*, 2022, An *et al.*, 2019), among other issues.

Although their contribution to consumer-brand relationships is beyond question, which brand attributes actually enable SBC remains less clear (McManus *et al.*, 2022). Researchers believe that if the brand strategy can provide consumers with an array of functions or values, then such a connection can occur (Lu and Ahn, 2022). As a result, previous literature has related SBC elicitation through different aspects. For instance, some scholars have focused on identity basis attributes, such as brand credibility (An *et al.*, 2019), transparency (Lin *et al.*, 2021) or appeal (Liu and Mattila, 2017). However, another stream of research has also furthered the understanding of how brand instrumental attributes such as perceived quality (Kemp *et al.*, 2012, Hemsley-Brown *et al.*, 2016), utilitarian benefits (Lin *et al.*, 2017), financial and functional values (Lu and Ahn, 2022) or social media marketing activities (Panigyrakis *et al.*, 2020) contribute to SBC formation. Brand channel-mix management might therefore also help to foster SBC and to develop long-lasting consumer-brand relationships.

In addition to brands, people tend to use products to create their self-identity (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). In this vein, scholars have recognized the critical role played by product involvement in consumers' relationships with possessions and consider it a critical variable vis-à-vis clarifying relationship marketing and how people attach significance to products (O'Cass, 2004). Product involvement is a concept linked to the individual and its intensity varies from one person to another, depending on the specific situation (Andrews and Shimp,

1990). In contrast to situational involvement –which can occur in response to a specific stimulus and which is transitory (Muncy and Hunt, 1984)– enduring product involvement is characterized by its persistence over time, to the point that it has even been seen as an individual trait (Sherif *et al.*, 1965). Involvement impacts individuals' attitude formation and behaviors, moderating the effect which different variables have on their responses (Petty *et al.*, 1983).

The influence of consumer involvement on individual responses to marketing actions has been widely studied in marketing literature (San-Martín *et al.*, 2011). However, its analysis in brand-related experiences is relatively scarce (Mathew and Thomas, 2018), and even more so in the channel-mix context. Although the literature has studied the moderating role of individual traits (e.g., the effect of personal innovativeness in information technology) in SBC relationships (Tan and Sie, 2015), in the channel-mix environment there is as yet no empirical evidence vis-à-vis the moderating role of product involvement in the relationships in which SBC is involved.

This research thus seeks to understand whether developing SBC might provide the basis for maintaining strong and enduring relationships for both firms and customers in the channel-mix context which is characterized by several interactions and by switching behaviors. Although previous research has sought to examine the importance of channel-mix management in several variables –such as satisfaction (Cotarelo *et al.*, 2021) and purchase intention (Shi *et al.*, 2020)– there is no conclusive evidence as to whether or not firms could retain customers, and as to what role brands play in this specific environment. The authors consider that the main reason for the lack of literature is that prior channel-mix studies have focused on considering channels and touchpoint management but have overlooked the role of brands in the equation (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022).

Following the recommendations of prior research (Yin *et al.*, 2022), this work addresses this gap by analyzing how SBC contributes to consumer-brand relationships in the channel-mix context, and adding the role of product involvement as a moderator of the proposed relationships. Specifically, this work joins channel-mix and brand literature and adds the role of products to explore how much the brand channel-mix perceived benefits might influence consumers SBC and how this connection affects customer-brand relationships, reflected through future channel-mix use and word of mouth (WOM). The authors aim to contribute to recent literature on channel-mix purchasing, branding, and relationship marketing, including product involvement.

2. Theoretical background and research model development

2.1 Relationship marketing in the channel-mix era

Relationship marketing seeks "to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met" (Grönroos, 1990, p. 138). The concept was introduced by Berry (1983), and since the term was first coined it has been widely used to study customer-firm relationships, and it continues to be the dominant paradigm nowadays. This approach proposes that the aim of marketing should be to build relationships (long-term ongoing processes) and not only transactions –short-term actions that end when there is performance– (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Moreover, Fournier (1998) argued for the relationship proposition in the consumer-brand context and proposed the brand as an active relationship partner.

For almost four decades of research, this paradigm has been broadly studied and applied in several fields (e.g., services, industrial and consumer market) (e.g., Papadopoulou *et al.*, 2001, Storbacka *et al.*, 1994). However, although analyzing customer-brand relationships is by no means a new area of inquiry, its implementation in channel-mix research remains scarce. The

literature has generally focused on consumer behavior, customer decision, customer experience (Nguyen et al., 2022), purchasing behavior, and post-purchase feedback and experience (Mishra *et al.*, 2021), while some scholars have focused on understanding consumer satisfaction (Muthaffar & Vilches-Montero, 2023, Rodríguez-Torrico *et al.*, 2020), brand trust (Pagani *et al.*, 2019), usage intention (Gao *et al.*, 2021) or consumer complaints (Rosenmayer *et al.*, 2018).

Bearing in mind that in the channel-mix context consumers use several channels to contact firms, and that their customer journey is composed of different interactions, it is essential to further the current channel-mix knowledge from a relationship marketing point of view, beyond the mere purchase intention (Kim *et al.*, 2021) –as this paper proposes. In relationship marketing, the customer-firm encounter is conceived as a continuum of episodes between customer and firm, rather than as an isolated transaction (Storbacka *et al.*, 1994, Grönroos, 1994). In the channel-mix context, the encounter must be conceived taking into account all the accumulated interactions with the brand, in which consumers switch between channels during the different phases of the customer journey (Rodríguez-Torrico *et al.*, 2020). These interactions could transcend the act of purchasing and be manifested in brand loyalty or commitment (Neslin, 2022), ranging from recommendation or WOM to the intention to continue buying the brand in the future, among other aspects.

In this regard, brands and SBC could prove key to achieving this enduring relationship. In her revision of the state-of-the-art, Correia Loureiro (2013) defines the consumer-brand relationship as the relationship between a brand and a consumer based on the assumption that brands are humanized in the minds of consumers, such that brand and consumer can therefore develop bonds as partners. According to Alvarez *et al.* (2021), creating a unique brand connection is key to avoiding relational tensions in the consumer-brand relationship.

Indeed, Fournier (1998) included self-connection as one essential aspect when assessing brand relationship quality and when ultimately seeking to achieve relationship stability/durability. The expression "self-connection" globally represents the associations and connections between consumers and brands (Correia Loureiro, 2013).

2.2. *The self-brand connection: concept, antecedents, and consequences*

There is consensus among researchers that people purchase products not only for their functionality but also for their meaning, a notion which is used to construct and define people's self-concepts and identities (Belk, 1988, Levy, 1959). When people use brands to construct or communicate their self-concept, a connection between the self and the brand is created –known as SBC (Escalas and Bettman, 2005).

SBC is defined by Escalas and Bettman (2003, p. 339) as "the extent to which individuals have incorporated a brand into their self-concept." These authors argue that in order to achieve their identity goals, people engage in a process in which products and brands are used to create and represent self-images. During this process of categorizing the brand as part of the self, a sense of oneness with the brand emerges, and a link between the brand and the self is created, resulting in SBC (Escalas and Bettman, 2003, Park *et al.*, 2010). This connection reveals the development of a solid and meaningful bond and relationship between the consumer's self-identity and the brand (Escalas, 2004, Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015).

Self-brand connection is characterized by solid emotional ties between consumers and brands that involve different and complex feelings about the brand (Park *et al.*, 2010) and which could also explain the development of favorable brand attitudes (Escalas, 2004). Moreover, SBC might produce prominent brand-related outcomes (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015). Knowing which factors favor SBC formation could therefore be crucial for managing customer-brand

relationships and, more specifically, interactions with them (for instance, through the different channels).

2.2.1. The formation of self-brand connection in the channel-mix context

Consumers can connect to a brand for two reasons: (1) the brand is part of consumers' self-conception and represents who they are, or (2) the brand has an instrumental value; that is, it is meaningful in terms of goals, personal concerns, or life projects (Park *et al.*, 2010). The former focuses on the connection with a brand related to a consumer's identity, who a person is (i.e., some consumers love the MacBook because it represents them). In the latter case, the link appears because the brand offers benefits that are meaningful in terms of fulfilling instrumental values (i.e., the MacBook is essential for some consumers to do their work or for entertainment purposes) (Chen *et al.*, 2022). Thus, if a brand is able to forge a link with a consumer's identities, goals, and concerns, SBC will have been achieved (Lin *et al.*, 2021).

As a result, different brand elements help to fit in with consumers' identities, goals, and concerns and thus build SBC (Lu and Ahn, 2022, Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2021a). For instance, Kemp *et al.* (2012) propose the attitude, quality and uniqueness of a city brand determinants of self-brand connection. In the case of luxury brands, Lu and Ahn (2022) observe that brand functional, individual, and social values increase SBC. Recently, Ibrahim and Aljarah (2023) confirm the effect of social media marketing activities on SBC. Considering channels, the study of Shen and Sengupta (2018) find that the communication channel (oral versus written) that is used to share brand information can impact SBC. Moreover, some studies propose brand strategies that concern sustainability as being contributors to SBC (e.g., Lin *et al.*, 2017, Jeon *et al.*, 2020). In this vein, Lin *et al.* (2021) confirm that SBC is enhanced when the brand allows consumers to achieve their environmental goals. Lin *et al.* (2017) point to the utilitarian environmental benefit, warm glow, and transparency as being critical for SBC.

To sum up, the evidence points to diverse ways to contribute to SBC in each specific situation. Thus, it is necessary to adapt the study of the reasons to developing SBC to the channel-mix context. Returning to the idea that consumers develop SBC because (1) the brand is aligned with their identity and (2) offers meaningful benefits to achieve their goals (Park et al., 2010), if the brand represents them and is useful for their daily activities in the channel-mix context, then they will forge SBC. In this vein, Rodríguez-Torrico *et al.* (2020) suggest that the tendency to use a mix of channels might form part of consumers' self-concept and consider it a consumer trait, part of consumers´ identities. Consequently, if a brand offers the possibility to use several channels, it could represent these consumers. Moreover, (Shakir Goraya *et al.*, 2022, p. 3) define the benefits as "the positive values that a product or service conveys in shaping the right goal-directed behavior among consumers." In the channel-mix context, consumers use different channels looking for different benefits such as find the best price (Balasubramanian *et al.*, 2005, Santos and Gonçalves, 2019), aim to increase the amount of information about shopping (Hu and Tracogna, 2020) or avoid risks and enhance security (Emrich *et al.*, 2015, Xu and Jackson, 2019). In addition, consumers use a mix of channels during their decision-making process since they expect to be able to make better shopping decisions (Balasubramanian *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, these consumers seek new and superior experiences when they combine channels (Konuş *et al.*, 2008, Gao *et al.*, 2021).

As a result, the brand channel-mix benefits could therefore be key for connecting consumers with brands. This ties in with relationship marketing premises since –in order to achieve a good consumer-brand relationship– consumers must perceive and derive relational benefits from these exchanges (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Therefore:

H1: The perceived benefits of brand channel-mix will increase SBC.

2.2.2. *The effects of self-brand connection on the relationship outcomes*

Current literature states that consumers who use several channels are more profitable than single-channel buyers, and marketing actions could be key in terms of encouraging them to use several channels in their purchase decisions (Neslin, 2022). Moreover, they present different behaviors regarding channels and have more expectations about brands (Rodríguez-Torrico *et al.*, 2023). This environment thus requires specific studies, since consumers' behaviors and reactions vary.

Prior literature supports that the use of a mix of channels is an important innovation for consumers (Lazaris and Vrechopoulos, 2014). In addition, the channel-mix intention is higher when consumers perceive that there is compatibility between this innovation and consumers' needs (Shi *et al.*, 2020). In this vein, SBC increases the likelihood of adopting brand innovations Casidy *et al.* (2021) and predicts high investment behaviors (McManus *et al.*, 2022), which could be represented by using the brand mix of channels to carry out the decision-making process. In addition to that, SBC has been supported as crucial for maintaining relationships with consumers since it positively influences brand loyalty (Lin *et al.*, 2021, Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, consumers with high SBC are more prone to use the brand offline channels to purchase (Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2021b) and repurchase (Sugitani, 2018, Wilson *et al.*, 2017). In the case of online channels, De Keyzer *et al.* (2022) find that SBC improves the intention to use advertising in the online channel to obtain information.

Furthermore, consumers who perceive that a brand offers them benefits in terms of fulfilling their self-identity needs are more willing to engage in long-term relationships to reciprocate the brand (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2016), and indeed one key feature of stable and committed consumer-brand relationships is WOM intention (Correia Loureiro, 2013). A consumer with a robust self-brand connection is more likely to defend (Casidy *et al.*, 2021) and recommend the brand (Lu and Ahn, 2022). Moreover, consumers connect with a brand because it reflects

who they are, and this connection leads them to share their experiences with others (An *et al.*, 2019). Prior research has also shown that SBC leads consumers to be active brand advocates (Sicilia *et al.*, 2016, Moliner *et al.*, 2018). In addition, if there is SBC, consumers will respond by engaging in WOM (Kemp *et al.*, 2012, Kwon and Mattila, 2015).

Applying this knowledge to the channel-mix context, this paper therefore proposes that consumers who develop SBC will intend to use several channels in their future purchasing processes and share brand WOM.

H2: SBC will increase **(a)** brand channel-mix use intention, and **(b)** brand WOM intention.

2.2.3. *The mediating role of self-brand connection on the relationship outcomes*

In addition to the direct effects of SBC, previous literature shows that SBC plays a critical role as a mediator in brand marketing actions and consumer responses (An *et al.*, 2019, Chen and Liao, In press, Herter *et* al., 2023, Li *et al.*, 2022, Lin *et al.*, 2021, Liu *et al.*, 2021). Tran *et al.* (2020) find that the advertising strategy may increase brand equity via SBC, while Jeon *et al.* (2020) suggest that perceived corporate social responsibility increases brand preference when consumers develop strong SBC. In terms of future behavioral intentions and WOM, Liu and Mattila (2017) confirm that SBC mediates the relationship between appeal and purchase intention; and An *et al.* (2019) support SBC as a mediator between brand credibility and WOM, after emphasizing the significance of considering mediating mechanisms in the analysis of the antecedents of WOM.

In the case of channel-mix, Shi *et al.* (2020) offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the intention to use multiple channels in the decision-making process; and find that, apart from considering the direct influence of all the benefits provided in the channel mix context, there are other consumer-related variables that mediate this relationship. Similarly, Shankar *et al.* (2021) confirm that the channel-mix use intention is influenced not

only by the benefits perceived by consumers but also by other mediating variables, such as consumer perceived values. Regarding WOM, Rodríguez-Torrico *et al.* (2023) show how the perception of a good channel-mix management affects WOM through flow state. As a result, bearing in mind the important role of SBC as a mediator and the necessity of considering mediating variables when analyzing channel-mix use intention and WOM, it is the key to deepen the understanding of these indirect relationships.

Moreover, within the channel-mix context, consumers carry out the different stages of the decision-making process through a mix of channels that best optimizes their demands at a given moment (Hu and Tracogna, 2020). These requirements are different and complex, and consumers expect to fulfill them during their customer journey (Huré *et al.*, 2017). Scholars have found that SBC is greater when the brand meets consumer expectations (Lin *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, if consumers perceive that the brand reflects their values and interests, the brand associations are seen as superior, thereby reinforcing SBC (Jin, 2018). When consumers perceive that brands offer the benefits they expect, they will use them to develop their self-concept (Tan *et al.*, 2018).

Consequently, it may be thought that consumers who develop SBC –because their channel management offers meaningful benefits to fulfill their goals and create their self-concepts– will carry out future purchasing processes using a mix of channels and will produce WOM communications.

H3: SBC will mediate the relationship between the perceived benefits of brand channel-mix, and **(a)** brand channel-mix use intention and **(b)** brand WOM intention.

2.3. *The moderating role of product involvement*

As anticipated, consumers create their self-images using brands and products. They select products that maximize their similarity to their desired self (Escalas and Bettman, 2003) and

are close to their self-image (Sirgy, 1982). In this sense, product involvement would play an essential role in self-brand relationships. Following Laaksonen (1994), involvement is a psychological bond between an individual and a stimulus object (product or activity) and can persist over time as an enduring individual trait (Andrews and Shimp, 1990). Product involvement refers to "the personal relevance of the product, which is determined by the extent to which the product is interesting and important to the consumer" (Malär *et al.*, 2011, p. 37).

Prior research has argued that products which are relevant to consumers help them to describe and project themselves (Khare *et al.*, 2011) and –when constructing their self-concepts– consumers choose products that are important to their interests (Wilson *et al.*, 2017). As a result, product involvement has been a helpful moderator proposed by the literature to understand self-related variables and intense relationships (Xue, 2008, Suh and Yi, 2006). For example, Suh and Yi (2006) showed that less involved people present a stronger relationship between satisfaction and attitudes towards the brand than high involved consumers. Singh *et al.* (2021) found contradictory results regarding the moderating role of product involvement in consumers' perceptions of brand alliances. In the case of SBC –and although there are no conclusive results– Tran *et al.* (2020) tested the moderating effect of product involvement in SBC relationships with personalized advertising and brand equity, while Fazli-Salehi *et al.* (2022) studied the relationship of SBC and consumer traits and purchase intention, comparing high and low- involvement products.

Moreover, the moderating impact of involvement differs depending on the variables studied (Kwon *et al.*, 2017), and the effect of independent variables on dependent variables can be differ between high- and low-involvement products (Tran *et al.*, 2020). Yet, what is the moderating effect of product involvement in individuals' responses? According to the

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), central cues –rational or functional signals– will have a greater impact on high-involved consumers' attitudes and behaviors, while peripheral cues –emotional or affective signals– will do more in the case of low-involved individuals (Petty *et al.*, 1983).

Accordingly –and applied to this specific case– the perceived benefits of brand channel-mix, such as obtaining a better price (Santos and Gonçalves, 2019), more information (Hu and Tracogna, 2020) or enhancing security (Xu and Jackson, 2019), could be considered central cues, depending on their utilitarian or functional nature. However, SBC triggers emotional states (Park *et al.*, 2010) since affect is central thereto, and the specific emotions that brands evoke may vary considerably (McManus *et al.*, 2022) –acting as a peripheral cue. It may be thus expected that higher product involvement will significantly impact the effect of perceived benefits on SBC. In contrast, the effect of SBC on consumer responses (i.e., channel-mix use intention and WOM) will be higher in the case of less product-involved consumers. Consequently,

H4: The positive effect of **(a)** the perceived benefits of brand channel-mix on SBC will be stronger for consumers with higher product involvement, and the positive effect of **(b)** SBC on brand channel-mix use, and **(c)** SBC on brand WOM will be stronger for consumers with lower product involvement.

Figure 1 sums up the proposed hypotheses.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

3. Method

3.1 Sample and data collection

Data were gathered from a sample of real consumers of Inditex –an international clothing group. Inditex was selected because it is an example of successful channel management

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(Kantar Consulting, 2018). Moreover, the literature has found that the product category determines a relationship between product involvement and brand-related reactions (Traylor, 1981). In this case, the product considered –clothing– is a highly symbolic product category (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2012) that people use to differentiate themselves from others (Solomon and Rabolt, 2004) and to assert their identity (Khare *et al.*, 2011).

A personal questionnaire was used to gather information. People were recruited after leaving one of the stores of an Inditex brand. They were asked to think about their most recent purchase of an Inditex brand (i.e., Zara, Pull&Bear, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Stradivarius, Oysho or Lefties) and to answer, considering the purchase made in this brand. The final sample amounted to 288 respondents who had previously purchased clothes at an Inditex store.

As regards the sample characteristics, 66.7% of respondents were women, aged <18 (1%), between 18-35 (42.4%), 36-50 (37.8%), and >50 (18.8%). In terms of occupation, 12.5% were students, 70.8% employed, 3.8% unemployed, 3.8% retired, 1.7% homemakers, and 7.3% students and employed. Most of the sample had higher education (71.2%). The rest had completed high school (24.7%) and primary school (4.2%). Finally, they reported a monthly income of <900€ (6.9%), 901€-1500€ (28.1%), 1501€-2000€ (20.1%), 2001€-3000€ (20.5%) and >3000€ (18.1%). This sample is balanced and representative (Kantar, 2021).

3.2   *Measurement development*

In this work, measures from prior literature were taken to operationalize the variables. As regards the brand-level variables –and as there is no single scale that reflects the ideas discussed in the literature– the scale used to measure the perceived benefits of brand channel-mix was constructed for this specific study, drawing on insights from Emrich *et al.* (2015), Konuş *et al.* (2008), Hu and Tracogna (2020). Prior to asking this question, respondents

were asked whether their last customer journey was taken using a mix of channels[1]. If they answered affirmatively, the scale was adapted to assess this last purchase. In contrast, if their last purchasing process was made through a single channel, they were asked to state to what extent they perceived that using a mix of channels would offer them the different benefits proposed in prior literature. SBC was measured through six items from Escalas and Bettman (2003). Brand channel-mix use intention was composed of three items adapted from Rodríguez-Torrico *et al.* (2019). Three items were taken from Kim and Lee (2011) to measure brand WOM intentions. In this case, items were adapted to the Inditex brand where the respondents affirmed having purchased the last time. Product involvement was measured using three items from Malär *et al.* (2011). Items were measured through a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) and were adapted to the study context. Table I details the scales used.

4. Results

In this work, partial least square (PLS) was used to measure and estimate the structural model since it works very well with small samples and helps to explore the progress made in established theories (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Statistical software SmartPLS Version 3.2.6 and bootstrap resampling (10,000 resamples) were used.

4.1 Measurement model

Harman's single-factor test was used to test for common method bias, which could appear when the independent and dependent variables come from the same source (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). After running an exploratory factor analysis loading all the items onto one factor, the single unrotated factor explained 33.5% of variance. This result indicates a minimal risk of

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[1] This variable is included in all the analyses (single channel or multiple channel previous purchase) to control its effect in the proposed relationships. No changes were found in the main model.

common method bias, since the factor does not account for more than 50% of the variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, the full collinearity test was run to increase certainty concerning the absence of common method bias. In all cases, results show VIFs below 3.3 (Product involvement = 1.29; Perceived benefits of brand channel-mix = 1.17; SBC = 1.73; Brand channel-mix use intention = 1.28 and Brand WOM Intention = 1.67)), as recommended in the literature (Kock and Lynn, 2012).

In order to test the measurement model, reliability, internal consistency, and validity were assessed following the recommendations of Hair *et al.* (2018). The results (Table I) confirm the reliability of the scales, since all the Cronbach α were above 0.7. Similarly, internal consistency is confirmed, with the composite reliability (CR) being above 0.6. Moreover, the average variance extracted (AVE) values are above 0.5, thereby evidencing the convergent validity of the scales (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Additionally, construct validity was confirmed, since the direct relations between the dimensions and their indicators showed significant loading values (t > 1.96, at a confidence level of 95%) in all cases.

[INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE]

Finally, the discriminant validity was confirmed by checking whether the square root of the AVE from each reflective construct was greater than the correlations among constructs (Table II), using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

[INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE]

4.2 Research model estimation

After validating the measures, the proposed relations were estimated. Results from Model 1 (Table III) reveal a positive effect of the benefits of brand channel-mix perceived by individuals on SBC (β = 0.279; p < .001), thereby confirming H1. Moreover, results show a direct and positive relation between SBC and the intention to use multiple channels for future decision-

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making processes (β = 0.345; p < .001) and to share the brand WOM (β = 0.577; p < .001), which fully supports H2.

With regard to the moderating effect, Model 2 offers evidence about the role of product involvement in the model. Specifically, the interaction effects of product involvement and SBC on brand channel-mix use intention (β = -0.171, p < 0.01) and brand WOM intention (β = -0.144, p < 0.001) are significant. In contrast, product involvement does not moderate the relation between the perceived benefits of brand channel-mix and SBC (β = -0.04, p > 0.05). As a result, partial support for H4 was found, confirming the moderation in the case of channel-mix use intention and WOM (H4b and H4c) but not for the creation of SBC (H4a). Moreover, Model 2 accounts for a substantial level of explained variance for SBC (R^2 = 0.258), brand channel-mix use intention (R^2 = 0.155), and brand WOM intention (R^2 = 0.376).

[INSERT TABLE III ABOUT HERE]

In order to test the mediating role of SBC between the perceived benefits of brand channel-mix and the brand channel-mix use intention and brand WOM intention, the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) in SPSS was used, and Model 4 was selected. In Table IV, the results fully support H3, confirming that SBC mediates the relationship between channel-mix benefits and channel-mix future intention (CI bias-corrected bootstrap at 95% above zero: CI = 0.037–0.128) and WOM (CI bias-corrected bootstrap at 95% above zero: CI = 0.037–0.128). Although, in both cases, the mediation effect proves to be significant, the results show partial mediation between channel-mix benefits and channel-mix intention, since the significant direct effect between these variables (Effect = 0.260) also remained when the indirect effect of SBC was included in the model (p < 0.001). At the same time, the relation between channel-mix benefits and WOM is fully mediated by SBC because the direct effect of these variables disappears when SBC is included in the model (Effect = 0.079, p > 0.05).

[INSERT TABLE IV ABOUT HERE]

Altogether, findings confirm the proposed hypotheses. As customers perceive channel-mix benefits, they increase their SBC and, in turn, consumers are more likely to use a mix of channels in the future and share WOM. Product involvement negatively moderates the second part of the model. Product involvement does not therefore evidence any relevance for the relationship between channel-mix benefits and SBC. Nevertheless, it does prove relevant for maintaining relationships, since the relation between SBC and channel-mix intention and WOM intention differs depending on product involvement.

Additional analyses were conducted to test two moderated mediations. In this case, Model 14 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) in SPSS was selected. Table V shows the results of the conditional effects of channel-mix benefits on channel-mix future intention and WOM through SBC for the different levels of involvement. The mediation effect of SBC between channel-mix benefits and future intentions is moderated by product involvement. The effect of SBC as a mediator on channel-mix future intentions and WOM is thus greater for consumers who display less product involvement. Customers who perceived the benefits of brand channel-mix management are more likely to use several channels in the future and share WOM because they exhibit higher SBC. However, this relation is stronger for customers who are less involved with the product than for those who are more involved.

[INSERT TABLE V ABOUT HERE]

5. Discussion and Implications

Despite the literature's emphasis on channel-mix management, enduring relationships with customers have rarely been considered. Based on the consumer-brand relationship marketing approach (Alvarez *et al.*, 2021, Fournier, 1998, Loureiro *et al.*, 2013), this work merges channel-mix and brand fields in an effort to enrich current understanding of how to

retain consumers in the channel-mix context, characterized by several channels and by switching behaviors. This work provides a new perspective to understand channel-mix use intention and WOM, considering the role of the SBC and product involvement.

Findings first suggest that brands could prove pivotal in maintaining lasting relationships in the channel-mix era. SBC in particular is seen to be critical, and it is improved when consumers perceive the benefits of using multiple channels in their customer journey. This finding expands prior literature on SBC by considering brand channel-mix benefits as contributors that enhance connections with brands. This work thus confirms the importance of functional elements of distribution policies that connect customers to brands, thereby complementing prior research that emphasized the importance of these elements, such as perceived value (Kemp *et al.*, 2012) or financial and functional values (Lu and Ahn, 2022). In addition, this work proposes new paths for retaining consumers in the channel-mix context which is characterized by multiple channels and interactions. Apart from the traditional variables – such as satisfaction or trust (Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020b)– the results suggest that other affective variables –such as SBC– can prove critical for consumers in terms of using several channels in future customer journeys and sharing their experiences with others.

Second, product involvement plays a moderating role in some of the previously tested relations. This work confirms the proposals of prior research that tested the moderating role of product involvement in brand-related relationships (Tran *et al.*, 2020) by showing how consumers who are less involved with the product are more dependent on connecting brands for maintaining enduring relationships. Although the impact of product involvement in the relation between channel-mix benefits and SBC could not be confirmed, it negatively moderates the relationship between SBC and channel-mix use intention and WOM. The relationship between SBC and channel-mix intention and WOM is thus stronger for

consumers who are less involved with clothes. In turn, although positive, these relations are weaker for those who are more involved with clothing. The relationship between perceived benefits and SBC is thus independent from the degree of product involvement, although it is critical in terms of the relation between the SBC and future intentions and sharing WOM – which is in line with prior research that has stressed the importance of product involvement in relationship marketing (O'Cass, 2004).

Third, SBC mediates between brand channel-mix benefits and the customer's WOM and channel-mix use intention. Specifically, SBC fully mediates the relation between channel-mix benefits and WOM, and partially mediates between the perceived benefits of channel-mix and the channel-mix use intentions in future shopping processes. In other words, the perceived benefits of using a mix of channels are vital for sharing WOM as long as the customer has developed SBC. However, when using several channels in the future, channel-mix benefits have a direct and indirect effect via SBC. The nature of the variables could explain this mediation intensity. According to Pansari and Kumar (2017), purchase intention is a direct contribution (i.e., direct contributions that emerge when consumers are satisfied) of the consumer to the brand, with WOM representing an indirect contribution (i.e., one which arises after positive emotions). In this case, SBC is an affective variable related to emotions. It therefore seems logical to assume that SBC helps in terms of directly contributing to a brand (purchasing), while for an indirect contribution (WOM), it is SBC that proves to be essential. However, WOM involves other people, such that it is not surprising that consumers need to connect with the brand before recommending it, since they are exposing their self-concept by sharing their thoughts.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The main originality of the results concerns the contribution of this paper towards furthering current understanding of consumer-brand relationship marketing in the case of channel-mix management and considering the impact of product involvement. Recent channel-related scholars have reported a scarcity of studies that consider brands, and they recommend including consumer-brand interactions when seeking to understand channel-mix behaviors (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, they call for research that explains how to retain customers in a context characterized by free-riding behaviors (Mishra *et al.*, 2021). As a result, this paper contributes to the literature on channel-mix management, brand management, relationship marketing, and product involvement.

First, the results contribute to developing relational marketing in the channel-mix context. Bearing in mind that consumers currently use various channels to connect with brands and that the customer journey is made up of different interactions, deepening prior knowledge of the use of these channels from the point of view of relationship marketing is a key issue. In fact, scholars have called for research on this matter, since few studies into the topic have thus far been carried out (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022, Lopes *et al.*, in press). As a result, another contribution to relationship marketing literature concerns considering the perceived benefits of channel management and the SBC. Both are important drivers vis-à-vis developing the intention to use channels in the future and to share WOM. This work thus merges brand management literature with relational marketing to respond to the major challenge of maintaining consumer-brand relationships by combining channels.

Second, this work advances SBC literature by proposing new antecedents of it and by adapting the consequences to the current digital world. Although there is no doubt about how important SBC is when it comes to retaining consumers, its role in the channel-mix context has not been previously explored. Moreover, the aspects that might enhance SBC vary

enormously. This paper helps to shed some light on current literature's lack of understanding of the matter (McManus *et al.*, 2022) and it addresses scholars' proposals (Park *et al.*, 2010) by exploring new brand instrumental benefits as antecedents of SBC. In the current the channel-mix context, if brands are able to manage channels in such a way that their use can benefit consumers, then they will succeed in integrating these brands into consumers' self-concept and thereby help forge SBC.

Third, this work is original since it merges brand-related and product-related variables. In this line, it contributes to this stream of research by reinforcing the literature which evidences that brand-related and product-related variables –and more specifically SBC and product involvement– exhibit interaction effects (Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2022, Lin *et al.*, 2021, Tran *et al.*, 2020). Although product involvement has received much attention over the years, this work furthers the line of research that joins it to brand-related variables. Moreover, the literature has often explored the role of brand involvement in consumers' reactions to brands (e.g., Gligor and Bozkurt, 2022). However, in this work product involvement has been considered instead of brand involvement because the former is crucial in the channel-mix context. For instance, Wolf and Steul-Fischer (2022) show that the consumer involvement with the product affects channel choice indirectly. Similarly, Geng and Chang (2022) find that the relationship between the perceived value and the attitude towards channel-mix shopping can differ between high- and low-product involved consumers. Moreover, brand involvement was not considered because it could be redundant, since SBC already captures the link between brand and individual (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Thus, the evidence of this study clarifies the role of product involvement –at least in the case of brand affective variables– such as SBC and WOM and channel-mix intention. However, this work also highlights the need for further

research to explore the different levels of product involvement and types (utilitarian/cognitive vs. emotional/affective) (Zaichkowsky, 1984).

5.2 *Managerial implications*

Companies are concerned about improving the consumer experience by optimizing the different channels –both physical and virtual– and, as a result, employ a number of different stimuli. The findings of this work help practitioners when faced with the challenging task of retaining consumers in this complex era.

This work shows how –in the channel-mix context– SBC makes consumers more prone to use several brand channels and recommend them and how, when seeking to develop this connection, the benefits associated to channel-mix management are crucial. The channel-mix benefits and SBC are thus key elements when aiming to retain channel-mix consumers. As a result, when considering the nature of these benefits, brands might design discounts and promotions associated with using several channels in an effort to enhance the perception of obtaining better prices linked to the use of various channels. Along the same lines, people perceive that the use of several channels offers them more information and leads to better decisions. Companies might therefore develop liquid content that can be transferred between channels and amplified within them so that each channel supports the others. One clear example of this type of action is the possibility of creating content on social networks that can be expanded by redirecting to the web or by including the contact of the physical store. This would also potentially empower the benefits of channel management related to greater security and a better shopping experience. These actions will facilitate both the intention to use several channels in future customer journeys and the creation of SBC, which can translate into enduring relationships.

According to Santos and Gonçalves (2022), in low involvement purchases there are fewer interactions with the brand in the customer journey, which highlights the need to strengthen ties with individuals, especially considering the most affective or emotional part of SBC. For these consumers, the brand may be an element that guides them in their decisions. As SBC is more important in terms of retaining consumers who are less involved in the product category, it is necessary to detect them and adapt the actions accordingly. First, firms should segment the market and seek to identify consumers who are less product-involved. Although it is not easy to measure product involvement, firms can focus on their browsing history, which is shorter for low-product involved consumers (Geng and Chang, 2022). Regarding the adaptation of actions, they should work on creating a connection with them, emphasizing the benefits of using a mix of channels in the decision-making process.

Last but not least, the authors recommend that firms consider the channel-mix strategy as part of the brand strategy. As in this case, brand strategy might imply the use of different individual brands. It is important to design an own channel-mix strategy for each brand according to the consumers expectations. Thus, it is vital to consider how brand consumers perceive and use channels to align with their self-conceptions. In line with the prior recommendation, market research and segmentation might prove to be good allies in this regard.

6. Limitations and directions for future research

Finally, this work is not without its limitations. First, information was collected considering the specific case of Inditex which –although allowing for an optimal contextualization of channel-mix management and despite the group's sound reputation– might limit the generalization of the results, since this paper focused on one single company and one single sector. In addition, although all the brands of Inditex have been considered, most of the

sample (52.8%) answered considering the brand Zara, since they were asked about their most recent purchase. Results might therefore be determined to a large extent by the chosen firm. As a result, future research might consider other companies and various product categories and compare their effects.

Furthermore –and as suggested– it would be interesting to further current understanding of the moderating role played by product involvement, considering different levels and the type of involvement. For instance, in the case of clothing, high-involved consumers avoid wearing the same fashion products as others since what they seek is differentiation (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2017). It would therefore prove interesting to advance in analyzing involvement with the product in the model presented, considering other companies and other products. According to Lee *et al.* (2019), the effects of channel integration on customer engagement vary in the case of high-involvement (i.e., Apple) and low-involvement products (i.e., Kroger). Another limitation of the work concerns the design of the questionnaire. The variable reflecting channel-mix perceived benefits was constructed for this specific case, considering ideas from previous literature, and respondents were asked to think about their latest shopping experience. Although this offers realism –since real experiences are analyzed– it does nevertheless entail certain limitations associated with people's ability to remember. These limitations could be addressed by developing an experimental design in which channel-mix benefits are presented and manipulated, considering different levels of channel-mix development.

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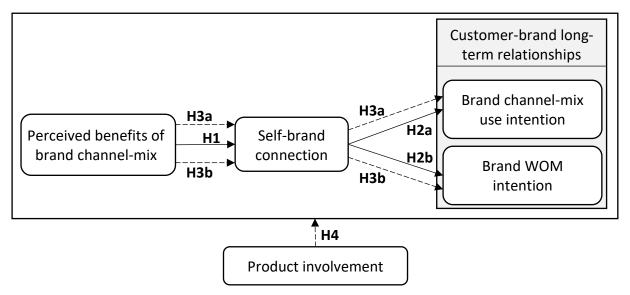
Figure 1. Proposed model

Source: Created by authors

Table I. Results of the measurement model

Construct	Item	Loading	T value (P-value)
The perceived benefits of brand channel-mix (α = 0.899, CR = 0.925, AVE = 0.713)	The combined use of different stores (physical and digital) …		
	…[would] allow me to have the best price.	0.717	14.370 (0.000)
	…[would] provide me with more information to make my shopping decision.	0.832	29.539 (0.000)
	…[would] help me in the shopping decision.	0.885	42.772 (0.000)
	…I [would] feel more certain about the shopping decision.	0.888	43.048 (0.000)
	…[would] improve my shopping experience.	0.887	41.775 (0.000)
Self-brand connection (α = 0.870, CR = 0.882, AVE = 0.616)	[Brand] reflects who I am.	0.879	62.856 (0.000)
	I can identify with [brand].	0.873	60.637 (0.000)
	I feel a personal connection to [brand].	0.845	44.692 (0.000)
	I use [brand] to communicate who I am to other people.	0.794	27.218 (0.000)
	I think [brand] helps me become the type of person I want to be.	0.705	17.403 (0.000)
	[Brand] suits me well.	0.563	12.118 (0.000)
Brand channel-mix use intention (α = 0.993, CR = 0.993, AVE = 0.986)	To search, evaluate, purchase, pick up, and return clothing…		
	…I am very likely to use any [Brand] store (physical or digital) in the future.	0.993	386.643 (0.000)
	…I would use any [Brand] store (physical or digital).	0.994	407.832 (0.000)
	…I intend to use any [Brand] store (physical or digital) in the future.	0.991	169.038 (0.000)
Brand WOM intention (α = 0.964, CR = 0.965, AVE = 0.932)	I would say positive things about [brand] to other people.	0.955	96.729 (0.000)
	I would recommend [brand] to someone who seeks my advice.	0.974	198.805 (0.000)
	I would encourage friends and relatives to do business with [brand].	0.969	190.929 (0.000)
Product involvement (α = 0.780, CR = 0.870, AVE = 0.692)	Clothing is very important to me personally.	0.880	50.358 (0.000)
	Compared with other products, clothing is essential to me.	0.762	16.981 (0.000)
	I'm interested in clothing.	0.848	33.399 (0.000)

Source: Created by authors

Table II. Discriminant validity

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived benefits of brand channel-mix	**0.844**				
2. Self-Brand Connection	0.278	**0.785**			
3. Brand channel-mix use intention	0.336	0.344	**0.993**		
4. Brand WOM intention	0.234	0.578	0.408	**0.966**	
5. Product involvement	0.067	0.444	0.207	0.377	**0.832**

Notes: Diagonal entries are the square root of AVE (in bold); others are correlation coefficients.

Source: Created by authors

Table III. Results of the proposed model

Relationships	Model 1		Model 2	
	Path coefficient	T Value	Path coefficient	T Value
H1: Benefits of brand channel-mix → SBC	.279	4.906[***]	.248	4.551[***]
H2a: SBC → Channel-mix intention	.345	6.307[***]	.349	5.904[***]
H2b: SBC → WOM	.577	15.992[***]	.542	11.636[***]
PI→SBC	-	-	.426	7.661[***]
PI→ Channel-mix intention	-	-	.088	1.442[n.s.]
PI→ WOM	-	-	.164	3.213[***]
H4a: PI x Benefits of brand channel-mix →SBC	-	-	-.004	.056[n.s.]
H4b: SBC x PI → Channel-mix intention	-	-	-.171	3.097[**]
H4c: SBC x PI → WOM	-	-	-.144	3.384[***]

Notes: SBC = Self-Brand Connection, WOM = Word of Mouth, PI = Product Involvement.

Source: Created by authors

Table IV. Results of conditional process analysis.

Predictor effect	Coefficient	t-test	F	R^2
Direct and total effects				
Benefits of brand channel-mix → SBC (path a)	0.278 ***	4.895	23.958	0.077
SBC → Channel-mix intention (path b)	0.272***	4.864	31.427	0.181
Benefits of brand channel-mix → Channel-mix intention (path c′)	0.260***	4.662	31.427	0.181
Benefits of brand channel-mix → Channel-mix intention (path c)	0.336***	6.026	36.317	0.113
Bootstrapping results for indirect effect	Estimate	Boot SE	CI (LLCI-ULCI)	
Indirect effect (a*b)	0.076	0.023	0.037	0.128
Sobel test	Z	P-value		
	3.415	0.001		
Direct and total effects				
Benefits of brand channel-mix → SBC (path a)	0.278***	4.895	23.958	0.077
SBC → WOM intention (path b)	0.556***	11.087	73.235	0.339
Benefits of brand channel-mix → WOM intention (path c′)	$0.079^{n.s.}$	1.579	73.235	0.339
Benefits of brand channel-mix → WOM intention (path c)	0.234***	4.063	16.512	0.234
Bootstrapping results for indirect effect	Estimate	Boot SE	CI (LLCI-ULCI)	
Indirect effect (a*b)	0.155	0.037	0.085	0.229
Sobel test	Z	P-value		
	4.463	0.001		

Notes: Bootstrap sample size=5000; ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; ns, not significant. Path a=effect of independent variable on mediator, path b=indirect effect, path c=total effect and path c'=direct effect. CI, confidence interval (LL=Lower Limit and UL=Upper Limit).
Source: Created by authors

Table V. Moderated mediation results

Mediator	Level of involvement	**Conditional indirect effects of Benefits of brand channel-mix on Channel-mix intention**			
		Effect	Boot SE	LLCI	ULCI
SBC	Low	.1138	.0334	.0570	.1880
SBC	Medium	.0742	.0222	.0367	.1250
SBC	High	.0346	.0227	-.0040	.0884
		Index of moderated mediation			
		Index	SE	LLCI	ULCI
SBC		-.0395	.0179	-.0826	-.0108
		Conditional indirect effects of Benefits of brand channel-mix on WOM intention			
Mediator	Level of involvement	Effect	Boot SE	LLCI	ULCI
SBC	Low	.1822	.0425	.1053	.2723
SBC	Medium	.1444	.0338	.0799	.2118
SBC	High	.1065	.0284	.0561	.1656
		Index of moderated mediation			
		Index	SE	LLCI	ULCI
SBC		-.0378	.0128	-.0678	-.0159

Notes: Bootstrap sample size=5000; CI, confidence interval (LL=Lower Limit and UL=Upper Limit).

Source: Created by authors