Managing brand equity in the brewing sector

Barbara Francioni and Ilaria Curina
*Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies,
University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Urbino, Italy*

Sabrina M. Hegner
*Department of Applied Sciences, School of Social Sciences,
Bremen University of Applied Sciences, Bremen, Germany*

Marco Cioppi
*Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies,
University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Urbino, Italy, and*

Tonino Pencarelli
*Department of Economics, Society, Politics, Università degli studi di Urbino Carlo Bo,
Urbino, Italy*

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper analyzes the effect of country of origin (COO) image, word-of-mouth (WOM) and brand distinctiveness toward overall brand equity (OBE) and its dimensions (brand awareness/associations; perceived quality; brand loyalty) in the brewing sector.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative research has been conducted by adopting the survey technique and structural equation modeling based on a sample of 401 Italian beer consumers.

Findings – Results corroborate a positive effect of (1) COO image and brand distinctiveness on brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty; (2) WOM on perceived quality and brand loyalty; (3) brand awareness/associations and brand loyalty on OBE. Findings also verify the mediating effects of the OBE dimensions on the relationships between the analyzed antecedents (COO image, WOM and brand distinctiveness) and OBE.

Research limitations/implications – Although the selection of a sample composed of Italian students guarantees good research internal validity, findings are not generalizable.

Practical implications – The study offers valuable strategies for brewing firms to reach high levels of brand equity. In particular, it identifies the key role of COO image, WOM, brand distinctiveness and OBE dimensions in realizing careful brand management processes.

Originality/value – The paper focuses on analyzing the influence of COO image on brand equity in the brewing industry, thus enriching an area of investigation that requires further insights within an under-investigated sector.

Keywords Brewing sector, Country of origin image, Word-of-mouth, Brand distinctiveness,
Brand awareness/associations, Perceived quality, Brand loyalty, Overall brand equity,
Overall brand equity dimensions

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the globalization phenomenon is leading firms to operate in an increasingly competitive scenario. In this context, the country of origin (COO) image assumes a key role in influencing consumers' purchasing behaviors, as they tend to associate beliefs from the

country with the product itself. This attitude allows COO image to affect consumers' perceptions of products/services by consequently impacting on their decision to buy them (Merabet, 2020). Consequently, the COO image becomes a key leverage in obtaining product/service differentiation, gaining high premium prices and intangible competitive benefits (Ferrucci and Picciotti, 2017).

At once, also branding strategies become a fundamental resource for firms to differentiate themselves and create value for consumers. This prominent role is also confirmed by the growing number of recent studies focused on branded issues (Murtiasih et al., 2014). In particular, brand equity represents one of the most investigated topics which becomes, today more than ever, a precious source of competitive advantage (Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2016). Overall, even if brand equity represents a key marketing performance metric (Raithel et al., 2021), there is no universally accepted definition of it (Brochado and Oliveira, 2018). However, literature has tried to systematize this concept by identifying two different perspectives: a financial (Simon and Sullivan, 1993) and a consumer-based one (Veloutsou et al., 2013; Aaker, 1996, 1991).

By focusing on the latter perspective, recent works (Kim and Chao, 2018; Sampaothong, 2018) have investigated the influence of COO image on brand equity. In particular, the analysis of this relationship has assumed a significant relevance in the light of the fact that the COO image consumers associate with a brand can function as a quality signal, thus driving brand equity (Septyanti and Hananto, 2018). However, despite these studies, research on the effects of COO image on brand equity is limited, and literature underlines how this relationship represents an issue that still requires great attention (Septyanti and Hananto, 2018). Moreover, the extant studies have mainly focused on specific sectors, such as the home appliances industry (Saydan, 2013) and the technological one (Septyanti and Hananto, 2018), thus highlighting an interesting gap related to the necessity of investigating the COO image-brand equity relationship in businesses different from those already examined.

Another critical dimension related to the brand equity analysis is word-of-mouth (WOM). Notably, with respect to the traditional communication tools, WOM has assumed, especially in the last few years, a key role in affecting consumers' behaviors toward brands. Therefore, the analysis of the influence of WOM on brand equity needs significant insights (e.g. Sijoria et al., 2019; Ansary and Hashim, 2018; Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011).

Along with COO image and WOM, the last analyzed variable is brand distinctiveness. Overall, even if it assumes a significant relevance to an extended audience composed of both academic and non-academic stakeholders, it represents a largely ignored aspect of branding (Alserhan and Alserhan, 2012), thus requiring extraordinary attention (Alanazi, 2018). Additionally, by specifically focusing on the relationship between brand distinctiveness and brand equity, it emerges a paucity of studies analyzing it (Alserhan and Alserhan, 2012; Norouzi and Hosienabadi, 2011; Yasin et al., 2007).

Overall, starting from these assumptions, the objective of this study is fourfold. First, it seeks to analyze the impact of brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty on the overall brand equity (OBE). Second, it aims to examine the influence of COO image, WOM and brand distinctiveness on the brand equity antecedents (i.e. brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty). Third, the paper seeks to analyze the mediating effects of the brand equity dimensions (i.e. brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty) on the relationship between the analyzed antecedents (i.e. COO image, WOM and brand distinctiveness) and the OBE. Finally, this study will analyze the above mentioned relationships in the beer sector. Specifically, it has been chosen for two reasons: (1) the lack of studies analyzing the brand equity antecedents within this industry; and (2) the growing relevance of this business environment, which has led both to a consequent increase in competitiveness and the need to identify successful branding strategies. In particular, in Italy, despite the deep-rooted wine tradition that has always characterized this country, in very recent years, the consumption levels of beer are approaching those of wine (Beverfood, 2018) [1]. According to Ricerche di Mercato e

Analisi (IRI) [2], in 2020, the beer sales exceeded the turnover of 2 billion euros for the first time, thus consolidating the increasing centrality of this industry within the consumer goods sector.

By doing so, the paper provides significant contributions both from a theoretical and a managerial perspective. Theoretically, the study tries to fill different gaps in the literature. Primarily, it analyzes the COO image effects on OBE, thus enriching the literature focused on identifying the OBE drivers. In particular, until now, existing studies have mainly examined marketing mix variables, while very few have analyzed non-marketing topics, such as COO image (Septyanti and Hananto, 2018). Moreover, the paper attempts to fill a further literature gap related to the necessity of deepening the analysis of the WOM role and impact on the OBE (Ansary and Hashim, 2018). Additionally, by focusing on the study of the brand distinctiveness and its effect on OBE, the work deepens the analysis of a critical issue that requires extraordinary attention from literature (Alanazi, 2018). Finally, all these relationships will be examined in an under-investigated sector (Calvo-Porral *et al.*, 2013b; Cillo *et al.*, 2019).

At the managerial level, the paper provides valuable and sector-based strategic guidelines specifically related to the construction and strengthening of the brands' value.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a review of the literature along with the hypotheses development. Section 3 describes the methodology, while Section 4 presents and analyzes the empirical results. Finally, Section 5 concludes the study by discussing theoretical and managerial implications, limitations and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background
2.1 Brand equity in the brewing sector
In the last few years, brand equity has assumed a prominent role in influencing the customers' food and beverage choice behaviors (Ameyibor *et al.*, 2022; Bihamta *et al.*, 2017; Wang, 2015). In particular, several researches have emphasized how customers choose to buy food products with a high level of brand equity since, in this way, they "feel confident about the quality of the product" (Ponnam *et al.*, 2015, p. 523). Also in the beverage industry, and in particular in the wine sector, different studies have highlighted the impact of the brand equity topic on the customers' purchase decisions (Brochado and Oliveira, 2018; Wilcox *et al.*, 2008).

However, especially in recent years, the attention of the literature has begun to shift toward the brewing industry, where the level of competition has become intense (Juga *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the brand equity dimension can play a key role since it allows brewery firms to achieve important competitive advantages based on premium price and higher levels of consumers' loyalty (Calvo-Porral and Montes-Solla, 2013). In particular, Calvo-Porral and Levy-Mangin (2015) analyze and compare the brand equity of local and global beer brands, thus corroborating how they tend to differ. In the same year, Torres *et al.* (2015) investigate the causal relations among the different brand equity dimensions, detecting how the positive impacts of perceived quality and brand awareness on brand equity are mediated by brand loyalty. By specifically focusing on beer brands and on the impact of social and traditional media communication on brand equity, Morra *et al.* (2018) detect how the social media tools can foster brand equity. Based on the analysis of the effect of brand equity perceptions on beer preferences, the study of Malone and Lusk (2018) confirms how perceived taste and brand familiarity represent two key determinants in the context of brand equity. Subsequently, Juga *et al.* (2018) examine the influence of logistics value-adding services and perceived service quality on brand equity among B2B customers of a beer firm, thus corroborating how value-adding services play a significant role in creating the brewery firms' brand equity through perceived service quality. By concentrating on the Italian beer market, Cillo *et al.* (2019) investigate the relationship between social media brand communication and brand equity by also considering the possible influence of sensorial preferences of active fans and followers on consumer-based brand equity. Finally, by specifically focusing on the brand equity outcomes, while Calvo-Porral and Levy-

Mangin (2015) examine purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium price, Rajh *et al.* (2003) highlight how repeat rate is an indicator of brand equity.

2.2 Brand equity conceptualization

At a conceptual level, one of the first definitions of consumer-based brand equity comes from Aaker (1991, p. 15), who defines it as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers". More recently, Kotler (2012, p. 243) conceptualizes it as "the added value endowed on products and services. It may be reflected in the way consumers think, feel, and act with respect to the brand, as well as in the prices, market share, and profitability the brand commands". From this perspective, brand equity represents the "differential effect that knowing the brand name has on customer response to the product and its marketing" (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010, p. 260). Therefore, a careful process of brand management becomes crucial for firms since it allows to make sure that the brand image perceived by consumers coincides as much as possible with that desired at the company level (Mazaraki *et al.*, 2021).

However, despite the existence of several definitions of consumer-based brand equity, scholars generally consider it as a multidimensional concept (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2021; Wesana *et al.*, 2020) composed of different dimensions (Foroudi *et al.*, 2018). In this regard, literature defines brand equity as "overall brand equity" by conceptualizing it as the "global preference for the brand over similar alternatives" (Bravo Gil *et al.*, 2007, p. 191). In particular, research proposes many dimensions composing OBE (Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Overall, the most adopted framework is that of Aaker (1996, 1991), who identifies four components: (1) brand awareness, (2) brand associations, (3) perceived quality and (4) brand loyalty. However, because of the high correlation between brand awareness and brand associations, Yoo and Donthu (2001) suggest a three-dimensional model, combining the above-mentioned constructs into one. In this paper, the model of Yoo and Donthu (2001) has been adopted.

2.3 Brand equity determinants

Brand awareness is a central component of brand equity because it has a significant influence on consumer decision-making. Indeed, brand awareness is "the ability of the potential buyer to recognize and recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category" (Aaker, 1991, p. 61). As stated above, brand awareness has a strong relationship with brand association, especially because brand awareness precedes brand association (Foroudi *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, while the first is linked to the capability to recognize/recall a brand, the latter refers to "anything linked to the memory of the brand" (Aaker, 1991, p. 109).

Perceived quality is related to the customers' perception of the quality of a product/service (Davcik, 2013), and this perception could potentially have an impact on their purchasing decisions (Wang *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, brand loyalty can be defined as "an amicable attitude and commitment toward a particular brand, builds around consumer satisfaction and leads to continued maintenance and purchasing of that brand" (Kim *et al.*, 2020, p. 2).

2.4 Brand equity dimensions and overall brand equity

Conceptually, literature identifies a positive influence of brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty on OBE. Indeed, Saydan (2013, p. 81) assumes that brand equity "occurs when consumers have a high level of awareness and hold some strong favorable and unique brand associations in their memories". At once, also perceived quality is considered a valuable dimension able to add value to a brand in multiple ways, such as by (1) offering consumers a good motivation to buy the brand, (2) allowing it to differentiate from competitors, (3) charging a premium price and (4) creating a strong basis for the brand extensions (Aaker, 1991). Finally, brand equity can also be strengthened by brand loyalty.

Actually, customers, who are loyal toward a brand, tend to show an attachment toward it which can be transformed, in the long term, into a sense of devotion (Sadek *et al.*, 2018).

Empirically, previous studies showed contrasting results in the relationship between brand awareness/associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and OBE. For instance, Lim and Guzmán (2022), Nguyen Viet and Nguyen Anh (2021), Muniz *et al.* (2019) and Vinh *et al.* (2019) find a positive and significant influence of brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty on OBE. Conversely, Pham (2019) and Bravo Gil *et al.* (2007) identify how the most influential dimension on OBE is brand loyalty, with respect to perceived quality and brand awareness/associations.

By specifically focusing on the brewing sector, Calvo-Porral *et al.* (2013b) detect how brand loyalty and perceived quality represent the dimensions with a higher relevance in beer brand equity. Conversely, Calvo-Porral *et al.* (2013a) verify a significant positive impact of perceived quality, awareness, associations and loyalty on OBE. Focused on the Portuguese market, the study of Torres *et al.* (2015) identifies how the positive effects of perceived quality and brand awareness on OBE are mediated by brand loyalty. Subsequently, Calvo-Porral and Levy-Mangin (2015) verify the positive impact of brand awareness/associations and brand loyalty on OBE. Conversely, the authors' findings do not support the relationship between perceived quality and OBE. More recently, Amelia (2018) identifies a positive and significant impact of perceived quality, brand awareness and brand loyalty on OBE in the beer market in Surabaya. Finally, through an analysis focused on two groups of beer lovers (sensory and non-sensory), Cillo *et al.* (2019) find that while perceived quality is supported in both groups, brand awareness impacts on brand equity only in the non-sensory group and, on the contrary, brand loyalty has a significant relationship only in the sensory group.

Despite these conflicting results, in the present work, a positive relationship between all the dimensions of brand equity and OBE has been supposed, thus formulating the following hypothesis:

H1. a) Brand awareness/associations, (b) perceived quality and (c) brand loyalty have a positive effect on OBE.

2.5 COO image and brand equity dimensions
Starting from the 70s, scholars examined the role of COO image in the marketing context since the home country of a brand can be a source of competitive disadvantage/advantage, and it could influence the sales of a brand in a foreign market (Suter *et al.*, 2018). In the current context, COO image can be conceptualized as "the country of brand origin" (Septyanti and Hananto, 2018, p. 91). In particular, brand origin is defined by Thakor and Kohli (1996, p. 27) as "the place, region or country to which the brand is perceived to belong to its target consumers". Therefore, this association consumers build can influence and alter their judgments toward products (Septyanti and Hananto, 2018).

About the possible COO image outcomes, previous researches examined its relationship with the brand equity dimensions. For instance, Pappu *et al.* (2006) and Saydan (2013) analyze the influence of COO image on brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. By focusing on the automotive sector, Murtiasih *et al.* (2014) detect how COO image significantly impacts on brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. More recently, while Kim and Chao (2018) analyze the impact of COO image on perceived quality and brand awareness, Ngan *et al.* (2020), Passagem *et al.* (2020) and Shirvani *et al.* (2020) verify that COO image positively affects all the brand equity dimensions investigated in their work (i.e. perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty).

By specifically analyzing the brewing sector, only one study (Kim *et al.*, 2016) examines the impact of the COO image on the brand equity dimensions. Notably, the authors find that COO image has a significant effect on brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality, with the largest impact on brand awareness.

Based on the above results, in this study, a positive effect of COO image on brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty is postulated by hypothesizing that:

H2. COO image has a positive effect on (a) brand awareness/associations, (b) perceived quality and (c) brand loyalty.

2.6 WOM and brand equity dimensions

In the marketing processes, the exchange of information between consumers assumes a key role, especially in the formation of their purchasing decisions (Hanaysha, 2016). Indeed, consumers can obtain recommendations via experts, family, colleagues or potential consumers, thus reducing the potential risks associated with their purchase. This flow of information is defined as WOM and conceptualized as an oral communication among consumers regarding a brand, product or service (Arndt, 1967). However, even if the role of WOM has been extensively analyzed by the marketing literature, its impact on the brand equity topic is limited (Ansary and Hashim, 2018). Despite this scarcity of studies, some works focused their attention on the influence of WOM on brand equity and its dimensions. In particular, one of the most recent researches is that of Ansary and Hashim (2018). The authors underline how positive WOM represents a valuable source able to nurture consumers' recall of a specific brand, thus enhancing brand awareness and influencing them in creating favorable associations with the brand itself. In the same year, Kim and Lee (2018) analyze the influence of WOM on perceived quality and brand awareness in the tourist industry. In a previous study, Ratna *et al.* (2017) find that WOM influences brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. By focusing on the food restaurant industry, Hanaysha (2016) finds a positive relationship between WOM and brand loyalty, thus confirming how positive recommendations from other customers allow enhancing their loyalty toward the reviewed products/brands. In his work, Yıldız (2015) corroborates a significant relationship between WOM and brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. Finally, by analyzing the automotive market, Murtiasih and Siringoringo (2013) find that the exchange of positive information through WOM increases brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty.

Based on the above-mentioned studies, in the present paper, the influence of WOM on brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty is analyzed in the brewing sector since, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no study has investigated until now these relationships in this specific industry.

Therefore, the following hypothesis has been postulated:

H3. WOM has a positive effect on (a) brand awareness/associations, (b) perceived quality and (c) brand loyalty.

2.7 Brand distinctiveness and brand equity dimensions

Brand distinctiveness can be defined as "the perceived uniqueness of a brand's identity in relation to its competitors" (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012, p. 408). In recent years, brand distinctiveness is especially linked to an innovative dimension (Agostini *et al.*, 2017) since it "can become an impetus for firms to come up with innovative products, services and processes" (Wong and Merrilees, 2008, p. 375).

Concerning the impact of brand distinctiveness on brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty, it can influence these three dimensions in different ways. In particular, it can play a key role in helping consumers to identify a specific brand among other ones easily, thus enhancing the brand awareness and contributing to building specific consumers' associations toward it (Susanty and Tresnaningrum, 2018). At once, brand

distinctiveness can also influence the brands' quality perceived by consumers. Indeed, a high level of perceived quality occurs when consumers identify the distinctiveness of the brand relative to competitors' ones (Yasin *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, few studies also identify brand loyalty as a potential outcome of brand distinctiveness. In particular, Rahimnia *et al.* (2014) test and verify the impact of brand distinctiveness on brand loyalty.

Starting from these studies and from the fact that the extant research has not yet analyzed the influence of brand distinctiveness on brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty in the brewing sector, in the present work, these relationships have been tested within this industry. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H4. Brand distinctiveness has a positive effect on (a) brand awareness/associations, (b) perceived quality and (c) brand loyalty.

2.8 The mediating role of brand equity dimensions

As previously stated, brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty have been shown to be significant outcomes of COO image, WOM and brand distinctiveness, as well as relevant predictors of OBE. Hence, it is expected that the relationship between COO image, WOM, brand distinctiveness and OBE could be mediated by the OBE dimensions (i.e. brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty). Therefore, the last hypotheses can be postulated as follows:

H5. Brand awareness/associations mediates the relationship between (a) COO image, (b) WOM, and (c) brand distinctiveness and OBE.

H6. Perceived quality mediates the relationship between (a) COO image, (b) WOM, and (c) brand distinctiveness and OBE.

H7. Brand loyalty mediates the relationship between (a) COO image, (b) WOM, and (c) brand distinctiveness and OBE.

Figure 1 depicts the overall model under investigation, with the research hypotheses.

3. Methodology

The study uses cross-sectional primary data, which have been collected from March to May 2021. Participants have been recruited during a student project through the adoption of a
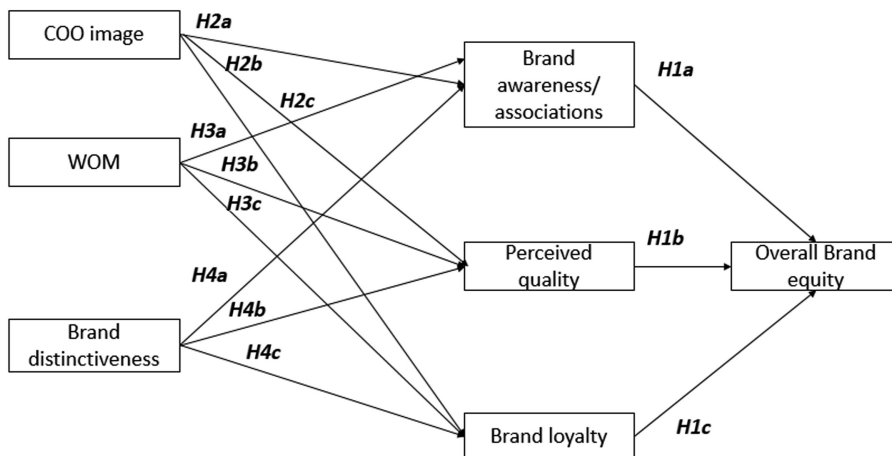

Figure 1.
Conceptual model

web-based self-completion survey via Google Form, a professional platform for surveys. The translation-back-translation method has been employed in order to carry out the survey in the Italian language. Concerning the questionnaire design, in the first section, participants were asked to indicate their favorite beer brand and the COO from which it comes. In the second section, the focus was on the investigated variables (i.e. OBE, OBE antecedents, COO image, WOM and brand distinctiveness), while in the third one, participants were asked to indicate the frequency of their beer consumption. Finally, in the last section, the attention has been focused on the respondents' profile.

Overall, 420 questionnaires have been distributed. After eliminating incomplete responses and discarding respondents with a uniform response style (Völckner *et al.*, 2010), we ended up with 401 valid responses. Table 1 presents the respondents' characteristics.

As our sample is not representative of the Italian population, we include gender, age and education as covariates, but no significant effects or differences were found. With a total of 401 respondents, the sample is above the rule of 200 and the sample to item ratio is 13.4, which is more than twice as high compared to the acceptable ratio of 5:1 (Gorsuch, 1983). Thus, an adequate sample size is achieved.

For the operationalization of the constructs, we employed existing and empirically validated scales.

Concerning the measurement of COO image, we adopted the scale of Shirin and Kambiz (2011), built starting from the perspective of Martin and Eroglu (1993) and Lin and Chen (2006), whose contributions represent key relevant works in the country-of-origin field.

With respect to brand distinctiveness, we used the scale of Yasin *et al.* (2007) since it is one of the most adopted in the measurement of this specific issue. Moreover, the items of Murtiasih *et al.* (2014) have been adopted to measure WOM since the authors provide a specific scale in a research model analyzing this topic in relation to brand equity. Concerning OBE, we adopted the Yoo and Donthu scale (2001) since it represents one of the most employed in the OBE measurement.

The brand awareness/associations has been measured by adopting the four-items scale of Yasin *et al.* (2007), while the perceived quality scale was developed from Loureiro and Kaufmann (2017), which is based on the contribution of Pappu *et al.* (2005), aimed at improving the measurement of the consumer-based brand equity's dimensions.

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Women	326	81.3%
	Men	75	18.7%
Age	18–23 years	358	89.3%
	24–29 years	32	8.0%
	30–39 years	3	0.7%
	40–49 years	4	1.0%
	50–59 years	3	0.7%
	Over 60	1	0.2%
Education	Secondary school	2	0.5%
	High school	372	92.8%
	University's degree	27	6.7%
Country of residence	Italy	397	99.0%
	San Marino	4	1.0%
Area of residence	Urban agglomeration	204	50.9%
	Rural area	45	11.2%
	Urbanized area	152	37.9%

Table 1.
Respondents' profile

Finally, brand loyalty was measured by adopting the six-items scale of Murtiasih *et al.* (2014), which has been built starting from the contributions of Chaudhuri (1995), Yoo *et al.* (2000) and Yasin *et al.* (2007).

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement for each of the items using a seven-point Likert scale, anchored by totally disagree (1) to totally agree (7). Appendix contains the complete list of the items, Cronbach's alpha for each scale and the source adopted for each construct.

4. Results
4.1 Validity and reliability tests
Several analyses were conducted to test our model. Exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM) are used to address the hypotheses. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity to measure sampling adequacy are calculated. KMO is 0.914 (> than 0.5) and Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant at 0.000 (below $p < 0.05$); therefore, both values are over the threshold and the data are suitable for factor analysis. Employing principal factor analysis with all items used in our model showed that all of them loaded on the proposed constructs. Overall, the seven factors explain 68.7% cumulative variance. None of the 30 items had significant cross-loadings (>0.50). All scales are reliable with Cronbach's alpha values higher than 0.8 (see Appendix).

The constructs' convergent and discriminant validity was assessed through a confirmatory factor analysis. Average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) form convergent validity. To obtain convergent and discriminant validity, the AVE should be > 0.40 (Floyd and Widaman, 1995) and the CR > 0.60 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). AVE values are between 0.59 (WOM) and 0.83 (perceived quality) and CR values range between 0.82 (brand distinctiveness) and 0.95 (perceived quality). Thus, all AVE and CR values are acceptable.

Discriminant validity is established by comparing AVE values need with the squared inter-construct correlation estimates (SIC). Details for means and standard deviations of the constructs, as well as AVE, CR and SIC values, are displayed in Table 2.

4.2 Hypotheses testing
SEM was employed using SPSS AMOS 26 to test our hypotheses. The findings show an acceptable model fit with $\chi2 = 980.40$; df = 284; $p = 0.00$; χ^2/df = 3.45; Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = 0.92, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.91 and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.92; Root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.07. Figure 2 gives an overview of the results of our model testing (only significant effects are displayed).

Construct	Mean (SD)	CR (>0.60)	AVE (>0.40)	SIC 1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. WOM	4.50 (1.36)	0.85	0.59	1						
2. COO image	5.49 (1.07)	0.89	0.72	0.12	1					
3. Brand distinctiveness	4.40 (1.06)	0.82	0.60	0.15	0.10	1				
4. OBE	4.92 (1.24)	0.92	0.75	0.05	0.10	0.09	1			
5. Brand awareness/ associations	5.72 (1.15)	0.92	0.75	0.05	0.08	0.07	0.18	1		
6. Brand loyalty	5.08 (1.25)	0.90	0.69	0.17	0.11	0.16	0.37	0.32	1	
7. Perceived quality	5.61 (1.00)	0.95	0.83	0.18	0.34	0.21	0.20	0.29	0.48	1

Table 2.
Reliability and
validity tests
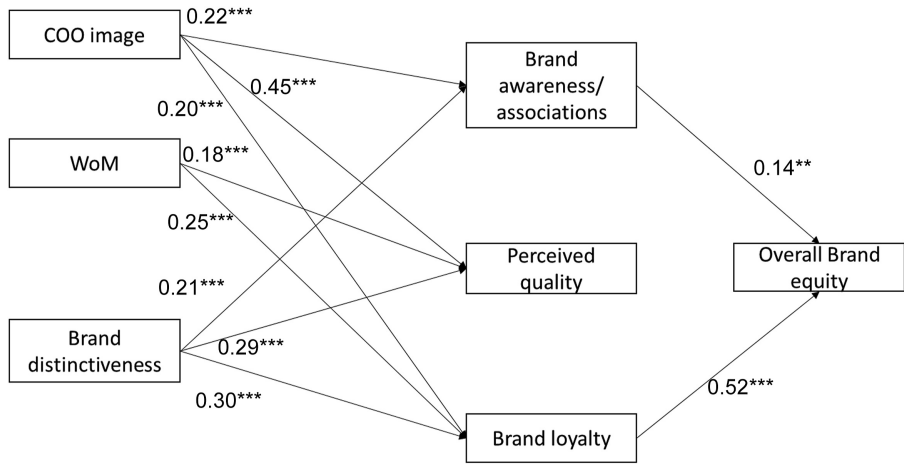
Figure 2.
Summary of the results

Brand awareness/associations ($\beta = 0.14$; $p = 0.004$) and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.52$; $p < 0.001$) positively influence OBE, confirming H1a and H1c. Perceived quality ($\beta = 0.05$; $p = 0.304$) has no influence on OBE, thus H1b is not confirmed.

COO image ($\beta = 0.22$; $p < 0.001$) and brand distinctiveness ($\beta = 0.21$; $p < 0.001$) positively influence brand awareness/associations, confirming H2a and H4a. WOM ($\beta = 0.10$; $p = 0.102$) has no influence on brand awareness/association; thus, H3a is not confirmed. COO image ($\beta = 0.45$; $p < 0.001$), WOM ($\beta = 0.18$; $p < 0.001$) and brand distinctiveness ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$) positively influence perceived quality; thus, H2b, H3b and H4b are supported. COO image ($\beta = 0.20$; $p < 0.001$), WOM ($\beta = 0.25$; $p < 0.001$) and brand distinctiveness ($\beta = 0.30$; $p < 0.001$) positively influence brand loyalty; thus, H2c, H3c and H4c are supported.

To test the mediating effects of the OBE dimensions on the relationship between our antecedents (i.e. COO image, WOM and brand distinctiveness) and OBE, we followed the recommended procedure by Hayes *et al.* (2017). We modeled the proposed mediations in a structural equation model (Gaskin *et al.*, 2020). Brand awareness/associations mediates the effect between brand distinctiveness and OBE ($b = 0.03$, BCa CI [0.01; 0.07]), as well as the effect of COO image and OBE ($b = 0.03$, BCa CI [0.01; 0.06]), while it does not mediate the relationship between WOM and OBE ($b = 0.01$, BCa CI [−0.001; 0.03]). Thus, H5a and H5c are confirmed, while H5b could not be confirmed. The indirect effects via brand loyalty are significant. The relationships between COO image ($b = 0.10$, BCa CI [0.03; 0.16]), WOM ($b = 0.13$, BCa CI [0.03; 0.15]), as well as brand distinctiveness ($b = 0.15$, BCa CI [0.07; 0.24]) and OBE is mediated by brand loyalty, thus confirming H7a, H7b and H7c. No relationship is mediated via perceived quality (COO image ($b = 0.02$, BCa CI [−0.02; 0.06]), WOM ($b = 0.01$, BCa CI [−0.01; 0.03]), as well as brand distinctiveness ($b = 0.02$, BCa CI [−0.01; 0.05]). Therefore, H6a, H6b, and H6c are rejected.

4.3 Discussion of the results

First, results show a positive impact of brand awareness/associations and brand loyalty on OBE, thus confirming previous studies (e.g. Vinh *et al.*, 2019). This finding allows detecting how the customers' awareness/associations and loyalty toward beer brands can significantly influence their OBE.

Conversely, the relationship between perceived quality and OBE is not supported. Overall, this result appears to be in contrast with previous studies (e.g. Lim and Guzmán, 2022;

Nguyen Viet and Nguyen Anh, 2021; Muniz *et al.*, 2019). This different finding could be explained in the light of the fact that having a high quality is not a guarantee of a successful brand (Ngan *et al.*, 2020), maybe because consumers suppose that all beer brands must offer an adequate level of quality (Calvo-Porral and Levy-Manging, 2015).

Moreover, results also confirm the key relevance of COO image in developing OBE dimensions in the brewing sector. More in detail, this allows corroborating how (1) the awareness/associations related to a beer-producing country can be transferred to brands coming from that country, thus influencing consumers; (2) COO image can impact on consumers' perception of beer brands' quality; (3) COO image can have an influence on brand loyalty, thus confirming previous studies focused on other sectors (Passagem *et al.*, 2020).

Concerning the results related to the WOM construct, a significant impact of this dimension on perceived quality and brand loyalty emerges. This means that the WOM transmission, in the brewing industry, can increase the brands' quality perceived by consumers. Furthermore, this finding allows detecting how the exchange of recommendations via WOM between customers can enhance their loyalty toward the reviewed beer brands, as highlighted by Hanaysha (2016) in his contribution focused on the food restaurant industry. Conversely, the relationship between WOM and brand awareness/ associations is not significant. This unexpected outcome could be explained in the light of two main aspects characterizing the beer brands, such as their prominence and longevity. About the former, differently from other sectors, beer products tend to be very prominent (Fanelli, 2018; Dumicic' *et al.*, 2003) because their logos/advertising are already everywhere; therefore, to raise awareness, WOM is not so fundamental in this industry. Regarding the latter (Smith, 2011), the majority of beer brands have been active for years. This means that since customers basically grow up with most of them, they perceive a lower necessity to rely on WOM to know this market and the brands that make it up. On the contrary, the relevance of WOM increases in much more dynamic sectors since it can assume a key role in the consumers' discovery process of new brands/products (Hervas-Drane, 2015).

Furthermore, results identify a positive and significant influence of brand distinctiveness on the OBE dimensions, thus highlighting the leading role of this dimension, in the brewing sector, in (1) guiding consumers to identify a certain brand compared to many others and building specific associations toward it, (2) strengthening its awareness level, (3) influencing its perceived quality and (4) affecting customers' loyalty toward it.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, an additional objective of this study is related to the investigation of the relationship between COO image, WOM, brand distinctiveness and OBE through the analysis of the OBE dimensions' mediating effects. Overall, results underline how COO image and brand distinctiveness are related to OBE through brand awareness/ associations and brand loyalty, while the relation between WOM and OBE is only mediated by brand loyalty.

5. Implications, limitations and future research
5.1 Theoretical implications
Theoretically, the study provides several contributions. First, it focuses its attention on the analysis of the influence of COO image on brand equity, thus enriching an area of investigation that is not yet sufficiently developed (Ansary and Hashim, 2018). Second, it examines this relationship in the brewing industry, which represents a sector little investigated by the extant literature. This sector has been selected especially for two main motivations: (1) the lack of literature focused on the brand equity antecedents within this industry and (2) the increasing relevance of this business environment in terms of level of competition and the consequent necessity of adopting successful strategies aimed at building brand value. In this way, the paper seeks to fill a research gap related to the need of studying

the COO image-brand equity relationship in business environments different from those already examined (Septyanti and Hananto, 2018; Saydan, 2013). Third, by focusing on another critical dimension of brand equity (i.e. WOM), the paper analyzes the WOM impact on brand equity, thus deepening a topic requiring, according to the literature, significant insights (Sijoria *et al.*, 2018, 2019; Ansary and Hashim, 2018). Fourth, the paper focuses the attention on brand distinctiveness, thus strengthening the analysis of its relationship with brand equity and enriching the paucity of contributions on it (Alserhan and Alserhan, 2012; Norouzi and Hosienabadi, 2011; Yasin *et al.*, 2007). Finally, the study provides a novelty by analyzing the mediating effects of the brand equity dimensions (i.e. brand awareness/ associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty) on the relationship between the analyzed antecedents (i.e. COO image, WOM and brand distinctiveness) and the OBE.

5.2 Managerial implications

Managerially, the study proposes valuable branding strategies to the firms operating in the brewing sector. In particular, results underline the necessity for the beer firms to face the growing competition not only through short-term strategies (e.g. promotional activities) but also through long-term ones aimed at enhancing the value of their brands. To obtain high levels of brand equity, the brewing firms need to realize a careful process of brand management to ensure that the brand image perceived by their consumers coincides as much as possible with that desired at the company level (Mazaraki *et al.*, 2021). Notably, this process could be implemented by exploiting those variables investigated within this study that showed a significant and positive impact on brand equity.

First, considering the positive effect of brand awareness/associations and brand loyalty on OBE, as well as their mediator role in the relationship between COO image, WOM, brand distinctiveness and OBE, it becomes fundamental to adopt strategies aimed at increasing brand awareness/associations and brand loyalty. In particular, the creation of brand awareness and favorable associations in the consumers' mind can be enhanced through (1) media advertising; (2) a careful management of the beer brand elements (e.g. name, logo, label, packaging and slogan); (3) promotional strategies (e.g. gift cards); (4) store activities (e.g. in-store products tasting); (5) experiential strategies (e.g. organization of sensory journeys within the firm's factory); and (6) planned web and social media presence. Concerning the website, it could be useful to insert the history of the firm, a blog section with news and awards, as well as an e-commerce with all the relevant information concerning each beer (e.g. taste, ingredients and alcohol content). Concerning brand loyalty, managers should pay particular attention to the following aspects: (1) image and innovativeness of the beer products; (2) organization of loyalty-building initiatives able to establish emotional/privileged connections between consumers and brands; (3) constant management of online and social media brand image; (4) creation of online communities established around the brand; and (5) realization of customized services, such as the possibility of personalizing not only the packaging but also the taste, color, consistency and alcohol content. In this way, customers can participate in the creation process by transforming the simple beer purchase into a personalized experience. Overall, this allows to increase the loyalty toward the brand and the firm itself.

Second, the positive impact of COO image on brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty allows corroborating how, in the brewing sector, the COO image can significantly influence the values consumers associate with a brand. For this reason, this variable can be exploited with the final aim of (1) contributing to the process of brand recall and brand recognition; (2) building positive associations in the consumers' minds; (3) improving customers' perceptions about the quality of the brands' products; and (4) enhancing the degree of consumers' loyalty toward the brand. At a practical level, this means that brand managers of beer products should consider, in formulating their global branding strategies, any positive image of the COO.

Third, the positive effect of WOM on perceived quality and brand loyalty allows confirming the relevance of this communication form in building the beer brands' value. Therefore, managers should be conscious of its role in the branding success. However, the main challenge is to find ways to monitor WOM, which is characterized by a low degree of manipulation. Despite this scarce control of the WOM communications, literature (Ansary and Hashim, 2018) identifies different strategies firms could adopt to handle them. Particularly, it becomes crucial to identify human resources able to play one or more of the following roles, such as observer, moderator, mediator and/or participant. In the first two cases, the strategies could be based both on achieving a process of monitoring/listening focused on the customers' conversations about the firm's brand/products and its competitors and encouraging the proliferation of online discussions between customers. For what concerns the mediator role, firms should create their own platforms by activating resources aimed at controlling the WOM communications born and developed within these corporate spaces. Firms can also assume a more active role (i.e. participant), thus becoming a direct contributor to the WOM conversations through their active entrance in those social media channels more suited to the brewing sector.

Finally, findings corroborate a positive impact of brand distinctiveness on brand awareness/associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. This means that managers should pay particular attention to underline the distinctive/innovative features of their brands through specific communication strategies aimed at emphasizing the unique values of their beer products. However, the creation of a distinctive brand is not only based on the development of an evocative logo and packaging but also and above all on the creation of memorable experiences through the engagement of the five senses. More in detail, while the sight sense could be stimulated through the level of sediments, density, foam and its persistence, clarity, color and the glass condensation (which communicates the beer freshness even before having drunk it), the hearing sense could be triggered by the bottle's uncorking moment. Concerning the tactile sense, it could be amplified by images showing mouths and lips since these body parts allow interpreting the information related to the temperature and density of the beer. About the smell, it is mainly connected to the aromatic components smelled by consumers before consuming the beer. Finally, through the taste, firms can communicate to the maximum the distinctiveness of their brand by enhancing, for instance, the particular and unique flavors characterizing their products.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Overall, the main limitations are related to the adopted sample. Considering that it is composed of Italian students and that the reach of the COO image can vary according to the nationality and culture of the consumer (Nebenzahl *et al.*, 1997), it could be interesting to analyze other target groups and geographical contexts. For instance, future studies could compare different European countries since literature underlines the existence of differences in terms of brand equity in the European brewery markets (Calvo-Porral and Montes-Solla, 2013). Additionally, future contributions might include other antecedents of OBE dimensions, such as product typicality (e.g. Tseng, 2020; Usrey *et al.*, 2020) and brand consciousness (e.g. Muniz *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, given that the study focuses its attention on the traditional WOM, future studies could extend the analysis of this topic by investigating, in a separate way, traditional WOM and e-WOM. Finally, as our paper is focused on a specific sector, future research could compare different beverage industries.

Notes

1. https://www.beverfood.com/quantic/negozio/product/. . ./birritalia-beverfood-annuario/

2. https://www.beverfood.com/mercato-birra-italia-crescita-a-doppia-cifra-gdo-crollo-canali-fuori-casa-wd/

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Appendix

Constructs	Cronbach's α	Main sources
COO image The product quality of this country is high level It is great to have the product of this country The product of this country is reliable	0.883	Shirin and Kambiz (2011)
Brand distinctiveness I associate X with dynamism I associate X with high technology I associate X with innovativeness	0.814	Yasin *et al.* (2007)
WOM People talk in detail when telling about brand X Many people recommended brand X I only hear positive things about brand X No one warned me of disadvantages when deciding to purchase brand X I got recommendations from friends/family/experts to buy brand I never heard negative things about brand X	0.837	Murtiasih *et al.* (2014)
OBE It makes sense to buy X instead of any other brand, even if they are the same Even if another brand has the same features as X, I would prefer to buy X If there is another brand as good as X, I prefer to buy X If another brand is not different from X in any way, it seems smarter to purchase X	0.916	Yoo and Donthu (2001)
Brand awareness/Association I know how the symbol of brand X looks like I have no difficulties in imagining X in my mind I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of X I have an opinion about this brand	0.916	Yasin *et al.* (2007)
Perceived quality Brand X offers very good quality products Brand X offers products of consistent quality Brand X offers very reliable products Brand X offers products with excellent features	0.952	Loureiro and Kaufmann (2017)
Brand loyalty I always choose brand X as the first choice I want to choose brand X when purchasing a beer I consider myself as loyal to brand X I feel disposed to pay higher price for brand X although other brands have similar characteristics I would not shift to another brand when brand X is available at the store I will re-think repeatedly about buying another brand even if they have similar characteristics	0.886	Murtiasih *et al.* (2014)

Table A1.
Construct
operationalization

Corresponding author
Barbara Francioni can be contacted at: barbara.francioni@uniurb.it