



# Consumer self-concept and digitalization: what does this mean for brands?

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## Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the discourse on the impact of digitalization on the consumer self-concept. The objective is to provide a broad understanding of the impact that digitally enabled consumption environments have on the consumer self-concept and to unveil how this relates to brands. The study adopts a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with five experienced Italian marketing directors operating in business-to-business and business-to-consumer markets. The analysis provides theoretical inputs about how digitalization has centered the consumer self-concept, the integration of digital resources and devices in the consumer self-concept, and the position of the consumer self-concept at the core of branding strategies. Moreover, the study yields a business-developed research agenda on the topic with three main focal areas: self-influence, hybrid experiences, and enthusiasm vs. avoidance. The study also has managerial implications pertaining to the relationship between the consumer self-concept and brands in digital spaces involving consumer–brand relationships, brand values, seamless positioning, and personalization.

**Keywords** Self-concept · Phygital · Consumer behavior · Digitalization · Digital

## 1 Introduction

Digitalization stems from the rise of information and communications technology (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016) and is defined as “the translation of an analog signal into a digital form” (Gartner, 2017). Digitalization is a dynamic process that goes hand in hand with technological evolution. Thus, it provides businesses with new opportunities to create value; allows for establishing connections between sectors, areas of

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activity, and individuals; and facilitates the creation of new business models (Castells, 2010). Data tell us that the world is becoming increasingly digitized. In 2020, the global smartphone penetration rate stood at over 78% and there were 4.2 billion digital voice assistants installed on these devices (Statista, 2020). By 2025, the number of smart homes is expected to reach 478.2 million internationally (Statista, 2021). Companies' adoption of Industry 4.0 technologies, such as artificial intelligence (chatbots, virtual assistants, etc.), machine learning (in recommendation systems), Internet of Things (in smart objects), and augmented reality (AR; using a virtual reality viewer), has created new spaces driven by human–technology interaction (Ballina et al., 2019; Vergine et al., 2019) allowing for an encounter between the physical and digital worlds in the same environment (Gaggioli, 2017). Digitalization has created highly interactive and engaging experiences for consumers (Ballina et al., 2019; Banik, 2021), and it has enhanced the mutual interaction between the physical and virtual spheres (Sheth & Solomon, 2014; Verhoef et al., 2017). This is affecting how consumers articulate their self-concept (Sheth & Solomon, 2014; Šimůnková, 2019). Self-concept is a construct that refers to the individual's awareness of the self as distinct from others (Rogers, 1959), and it has gained prominence in consumer behavior studies as a concept capable of explaining the motivations behind consumption choices (Shavelson et al., 1976). The extensive development of cyberspace and the ubiquity of digital media in individuals' lives have significantly changed the way human beings present themselves in digital environments (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Belk, 2014; Sheth & Solomon, 2014) and express their self-concept. They employ the resources made available by the network (Schau and Mary C. Gilly, 2003) to build an ideal self or reinforce their self-image, ascribing the meaning of their digital self-extension to digital possessions (Belk, 2014). Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this aspect brings out a new relationship between consumers and the virtual world (Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020; Sheth, 2020). The emergence of perceived continuity between the real and the digital, in addition to the changes in consumers' identity construction, has implications for both consumer behavior scholars and marketers (Sheth & Solomon, 2014). Despite acknowledgment of the relevance of the interplay between the self-concept and digitalization for firms, there is a lack of studies that capture the point of view of businesses on this topic and that provide a broad overview of the implications for brands of the evolving consumer self-concept in digitally enabled consumption environments. In light of this gap, the objective of this study is to contribute to the theoretical discourse on the impact of digitalization on the consumer self-concept by taking the viewpoint of firms to understand what happens to the consumer self-concept in hybrid consumption environments and unveil what this means for brands. The findings stress the centrality of the consumer self-concept in increasingly digitalized consumption environments, highlighting their continuous reciprocation with brands. Here, digital proves to be a valuable lever for deepening brand–consumer relationships by means of new platforms of encounter and new ways of connecting that enabling technologies and the power of data provide. The study also shows the understanding of managers' awareness of how digitalization is impacting the consumer self-concept and the changes this demands to strategies for articulating brand personality and approaches to consumer data management.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Consumer self-concept

Self-concept is defined as the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings, having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1989). Thus, it is an individual’s awareness of being an “I” and “Me” with peculiar characteristics and of the relationships between that I and Me with external others and the surrounding environment (Rogers, 1959). In psychology, self-concept is seen as a dynamic component of the cognitive system, which is involved in the regulation of behavior (Markus & Wurf, 1987) and contains all the knowledge, values, and opinions one uses to interpret oneself and the outside world (Oyselman et al., 2012). Self-concept is also a construct of self-schema that results from the individual’s past experiences (Rogers, 1959). According to Roger’s (1959) theory of self-concept, which represents a theoretical approach borrowed from consumer behavior scholars, the self-concept is a multidimensional construct (Sirgy, 1982) including self-image, or the real self, as the image the individual has of themselves and the ideal self, which denotes the self-concept the individual would like to have and for which they have the highest regard (Rogers, 1959). Alongside the ideal self and self-image is the social self, that is how a person shows themselves to others (Sirgy, 1982) and manifests the self-concept through the act of self-expression (Goffman, 1969). In consumer behavior literature, the importance assigned to the self-concept construct has grown in step with the recognition of products’ symbolic meanings beyond their functional value (Kassarjian, 1971; Levy, 1959). Consequently, the self-concept is valued as a useful theoretical framework to explain the preferences that consumers express toward some products rather than others (Birdwell, 1968; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Landon Jr., 1974; Sirgy, 1982). Early studies linked brand choice to the pairing of brand image with self-image (Dolich, 1969; Grubb & Hupp, 1968; Ross, 1971). According to the self-congruity theory, the perceived match between a product image and the real or ideal self or social concept guides consumer purchase motivations (Hosany & Martin, 2012; Sirgy, 1982; Zogaj et al., 2021). The ideal and real self-concepts intervene in the creation of emotional connections between consumers and brands (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017; Malär et al., 2011). Brand attachment depends upon the brand’s ability to become an enabler of the consumer’s self-concept (Chaplin & John, 2005; Park et al., 2013). Congruence between the self-concept and brand personality leads to a higher level of emotional attachment to a brand, especially when the brand’s promise is congruent with the consumer’s achievement of their ideal self (Malär et al., 2011).

### 2.2 Digitalization and consumer self-concept

Digitization has enhanced consumers’ creativity to act by mobilizing resources in the marketplace (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006) to express the power of information and exert an influence through opinions and content (Labrecque et al., 2013; Umit Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007). Digitalization turns the consumer into a prominent actor in the creation of value experiences together with the company (Ramaswamy, 2011; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016). Early studies on the impact of digitization on

self-concept focused on computer mediated environments (CMEs), explaining how they represent places to control one's self-presentation (Walther, 2007) and provide a reservoir of narrative resources for the consumer to shape an identity constructed in the form of a digital doppelgänger to be presented to others (Schau and Mary C. Gilly, 2003). On the internet, all digital representations of the consumer become means of showing the self and are seen as digital self-extensions (Belk, 2013). Studies on social media platforms have also highlighted how consumers use social media to redesign enhanced identities to show to others (Doster, 2013) to increase their self-esteem (Fox et al., 2018) by unfolding a desired personality that they wish to build in the offline world (Zhao et al., 2008). The resources provided by brands in digital environments are integrated in consumers' digital narratives of self-expression (Sung et al., 2018) and function as tools to build a coherent narration of the self that contributes to identity construction (Halliday, 2016) and to the transformation of the self into a consumption object in the form of the "branded self" (Hearn, 2008). Scholars have contended that in cyberspace, consumers are attentive to protecting their personal sphere and self-disclosure (Markos et al., 2018) and prefer anonymity to present their real selves (O'Leary & Murphy, 2019). The digital objects of Industry 4.0 are also seen as natural extensions of the consumer self-concept and prosthetic enablers of individuals (Belk, 2014). Through digital means, the consumer can build dynamic and joint forms of relationships with smart objects, modeling assemblages of experience (DeLanda, 2016) in which the consumer's self-concept becomes an integral part of the assembly with the object itself and the object can actively contribute to the construction of the consumer's identity through self-expansion and self-extension experiences (Hoffman & Novak, 2018; Novak & Hoffman, 2019). Increasingly, smart objects and devices are showing the capacity to establish agentic relations with consumers and properties that exceed their functional role and go so far as to be considered friends "trapped in a machine" (Schweitzer et al., 2019). Immersive technologies, such as AR and mixed reality, are meaningful for the self-concept as well; from the mingling of the physical self with its virtual representation (Javornik et al., 2021), they build an augmented self that can bridge existing divergences between the consumer's real and ideal selves (Javornik & Pizzetti, 2017). The development of 4.0 enabling technologies and their integration in the spaces of individuals (Sheth, 2020) has also increasingly made ephemeral the boundaries between online and offline (Sheth & Solomon, 2014). Recently, the presence of digital in the physical has articulated hybrid spaces of natural interaction between humans and technology through interfaces that have been called phygital (Gaggioli, 2017). In such hybrid spaces, the difference between being online and offline is erased as the digital element becomes an integral part of the individual's self-concept and a hybrid self-concept, which is driven by connectedness, is created (Šimůnková, 2019). Recent studies have shown that in hybrid environments, consumer engagement and brand patronage increase (Banik, 2021) as the phygital adds symbolic meanings to the customer experience (Mele et al., 2021). However, these studies have not interpreted how the consumer self-concept relates to brands in such new digitally led physical environments.

Evidently, the literature lacks theoretical contributions that clarify the broad impacts of the evolution of hybrid environments on the self-concept in its interplay with brands. Moreover, as the impact of digitalization on the self-concept has been

**Table 1** Salient theoretical contributions regarding consumer self-concept and digitalization

Authors	Technology investigated	Methodology	Paradigm	Main findings
Schau and Gilly, 2003	CME (websites)	Content analysis and interviews	Extended self theory	Computer mediated environment (CME) space where consumer can present themselves and space for interaction and use the resource of internet as a medium to convey their self.
Walther 2007	CME	Experiment	Self-presentation theory	CMC users spend time to edit their messages to enhance their self-presentations. The process has been called hyper- personal interaction.
Zhao et al., 2008	SNS (Facebook)	Content analysis	Self-presentation theory	In social media consumers construct personalities they would like to realize in the future. These are “to be personalities” of the offline world.
Hearn 2008	SNS	Literature review	Self-presentation theory	Social Media promote virtual representations of consumers in a practice of posting personal information to enhance self- branding through self- promotion.
Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012	SNS (Facebook)	observational research, diaries, focus groups, in-depth interviews electronic journal	Self-brand congruence theory	Consumers resort to brands online to clarify some characteristics of their self-concept and to represent actual and ideal selves to present to others.
Belk 2013	virtual goods	Literature review	Extended self theory	Selves co-constructed in the digital realm through avatars, photos and videos, articulate ideal or alternative selves for the exploration of different personalities.
Doster 2013	SNS (Bebo)	Interpretativistic approach	Extended self and self-presentation theory	Teens wield similar strategies for self- presentation in OSNs to those used in real life, associating themselves with activities, interests, objects, brands and people.
Belk 2013	web and smart device	Literature review	Digital extended self theory	Digital objects become mediated technological part of the natural self and help identity construction.
Sheth & Solomon 2014	web and smart device	Literature review	Extended self theory	Technology blurs the limits between online and offline, the inner and the outer self, the physical and the virtual experience.
Halliday 2016	SNS (Facebook)	Structured diary	S-D Logic and CCT	Creating and consuming USG is a journey of self-transformation, to validate the self and build self-esteem.

**Table 1** (continued)

Authors	Technology investigated	Methodology	Paradigm	Main findings
Iqani and Schroeder, 2016	selfie	Literature review	Media studies	Selfie represent a form of expression of the self, enabled by digitalization. that is a moment of self-expression stemming out narcissistic behavior
Hoffman & Novak 2018	IoT	Literature review	Assemblage theory	The experience with the smart object affects the consumer's self-concept, generating a self expansion and self restriction experiences.
Fox et al., 2018	SNS (Instagram, Snapchat)	mixed method: interpretive approach and Latent Class Analysis and regression analysis	Self-presentation and self congruence theory	Selfie shared on social media are mans for self expression and for presenting multiple selves.
Markos et al., 2018	n/a	Experiment	Self-disclosure theory	Consumers protect their self online and make self disclosure to friends and trusted market entities
Schweitzer et al., 2019	voice assistants	In-depth interviews	Digital extended self and assemblage theory	Users achieve a partner-like relationship with their devices and see them as an integral part of their extended self and prosthesis.
Šimůnková 2019	smart device	Literature review	CCT discourse on hybridization	Technology leads to an annihilation of the boundaries between the real and virtual worlds and the self and create hybrid identities
Javornik et al., 2021	AR Mirror	Three lab Experiments and additional survey-based study	Self congruence theory	AR momentarily bridge the gap between the actual and ideal self concept. The effect is moderated by self esteem
This study	hybrid consumption environments	In-depth interviews	Digital extended self, Self presentation, Self congruence and Assemblage theory	Hybrid consumption environments are leverage for consumer self promotion, and self hybridization, affecting the relationship with brands with respect to role, values, positioning and personalization.

addressed in relation to consumer behavior, there is a lack of empirical contributions that consider marketing practitioners' cognition about the topic. Hence, this study answers the following research question: What does the interaction of the consumer's self-concept with digitally enabled environments mean for brands?

### 3 Methodology

The study adopted the cognitive perspective of marketing managers. Coherently with the explorative purpose of the research, a qualitative approach was employed using the in-depth interview method (Malhotra, 2019). The in-depth interviewing technique is recognized as an effective method of unearthing a body of knowledge through an individual's thoughts, experiences, and emotions regarding a specific topic (Mears, 2012). Purposive sampling was employed to select the final sample of managers to interview (Robinson, 2014). A key informant approach was adopted for the panel selection (Robson & Foster, 1989), as the informants identified for interviews were recognized as having a privileged point of view in the investigated domain—that is, digitally enabled brand environments. Four stratification variables were employed for the sample selection (Campbell et al., 2020): working in the marketing area, being in a top-level position, working for an Italian company with a strong international outlook and belonging to business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) markets. To identify informants for the study, a preliminary search was made of Italian companies experimenting with smart technologies. This yielded a set of Italian companies to potentially include in the study and, within them, managers to recruit for the research. The request for an interview was submitted to the selected marketing managers via email and LinkedIn. Five of them consented to take part in the study. The interviews were conducted online, either indirectly through email or directly through Zoom or Meet platforms and via telephone. Each interview was divided in two phases. In the first phase, interviewees were provided with an initial stimulus (for interviews via phone and email) or a set of slides (for interviews via Meet and Zoom) with a list of themes that had emerged from a previous SLR about the digital self (Bartoli et al., 2022). These themes were self-narration, self-enhancement, ambivalence about the virtual and real selves, self-extension, and privacy protection. In phase two, informants were asked three guiding questions about the topic: (a) their general views on the five topics shared, (b) their thoughts about emerging aspects relating to the consumer self-concept and its relationship with technology, and (c) the implications for brands resulting from the impacts of digitalization on the consumer self-concept.

The informants were free to express their views, and the researcher's role was to accompany the natural unfolding of each informant's speech. The interview data underwent two software-assisted coding cycles—descriptive and pattern coding cycles—through MAXQDA software. In the first cycle of descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013), codes were linked to the guiding questions and grouped into categories. In the second pattern coding cycle, the codes and categories were grouped and analyzed systematically to elaborate explanatory themes of the phenomenon under investigation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Consumer self-concept in digital environments

The informants' narratives provide an interpretive framework for the changes in consumer self-concept derived from the interaction with digital objects and platforms in consumption environments, and they are structured around three topics: the twin self, the hybrid self, and the hidden self.

#### 4.1.1 The twin self

Digital channels become means of self-promotion. In fact, when individuals tell their stories, especially on social media channels (e.g., Facebook or LinkedIn), they compose a narrative of themselves aimed at self-exaltation (looking good in front of others) and self-assessment (seeing how others perceive them). The digital becomes the place where individuals draw on the network's intangible resources to build a self that differs from the one experienced in the real world. As one manager pointed out, through digital devices, consumers create "a digital twin" of themselves, but this demands that their virtual identity be tied to being constantly connected in an always-on mode between the real and the virtual. Practitioners recognized that this activity of individuals presenting the self in digital environments is independent from the phenomenon of consumption, but it nevertheless has a strong impact on them, as consumers ask brands and products to be part of their narratives and they act as brands:

There's obviously a different role of the customer who has the power to narrate a brand, and that's an important element in the relationship, as a consumer interacting with brands and digitalization also makes them ambassador and spokesperson of the brand.

Managers' narratives are consistent with what has emerged in the literature regarding the connection between offline and online identities. Managers expressed an awareness that in virtual environments, consumers show aspects of their real identity, which is embellished through digital resources (Doster, 2013; Zhao et al., 2008). Such awareness of the close relationship between offline and online identities allows companies to discover in virtual spaces the unmet needs of consumers.

#### 4.1.2 The hybrid self

The hybridization of the self is considered relevant for the future of retail and services, and its evolution is linked not only to the emergence of social media but also to the integration of enabling technologies, such as AR (e.g., visors), in consumer environments:

The integration of "online" and "offline" experiences is increasingly crucial to successfully completing the buying process. Indeed, consumers, through such integration, are able to shorten the distance between perceived and real.



Practitioners also associated the hybrid self with the metaverse concept by defining it as “a possible backdrop that could change everything” that in the future will become something concrete, and the impact will be evident in the consumer experience:

I think we are still a few decades ahead of ...maybe we will get there, but I believe that having an augmented reality in the store would simplify a lot of the shopping experience.

Managers perceived the hybridization of the self as the result of consumers' adoption of technology as an integral part of the identity-building process and not just as an external prosthesis. To this point, managers' perceptions went beyond the concept of an extended self (Belk, 2014), as technology intervenes with an agentic function in the construction of needs, taking an active role in the framing of consumption experiences (Šimůnková, 2019) toward the creation of human–technology assemblages of experiences (Hoffman & Novak, 2015).

#### 4.1.3 The hidden self

Practitioners focused on the concept of data, defined by one practitioner as “a computing power”. Their reflections approached the data collection power of smart objects that, on the one hand, represent the digital self-extension and consumer prosthesis and, on the other hand, collect consumer data that brands can use to meet the needs of consumers:

[Smart objects] serve to render, from your real life not your digital life, the information that is missing to complete your profile so as to offer you different consumer propositions and to sell you what you need.

This highlights the role of enabling technologies in supporting consumer profiling (Fares et al., 2019) and improving selective acquisition strategies (Libai et al., 2020). Moreover, practitioners are aware of the ability of smart objects to generate real-time consumer insights at the individual level (Gupta et al., 2020). Companies can collect and analyze such consumer data to uncover psychological traits and emotional states (Matz & Netzer, 2017) to predict and satisfy consumers' latent needs, interact faster with customers through personalized messages (Gupta et al., 2020; Libai et al., 2020), and increase consumer involvement and the generation of new products (Zhan et al., 2018). At the same time, this confirms the importance consumers attribute to sensitive information about the self (Markos et al., 2018):

This will be an increasing trend, to be fully aware of what happens to one's data.

The interviewed managers add to evidence in the literature regarding consumer self-disclosure and anonymity, the influence that privacy protection has on communication strategies, and the centrality of strategies aimed at transparency about the management of consumer data in increasing consumer trust.

**Table 2** Practitioners' additional research questions

Theme	Research Questions
Hybrid Experiences	<p>What is the impact of hybrid technologies on consumer self experience with brands?</p> <p>How interaction with technology impact the consumer self-brand connection?</p> <p>How hybrid experiences vary across generations and consumer typologies?</p>
Enthusiasm vs. Avoidance	<p>How has Covid-19 contributed to the strengthening of the consumer digital identity?</p> <p>How does the approach to digital vary across generations?</p> <p>How does the approach to digital vary across consumer types (i.e. early adopters)?</p> <p>How are the functional characteristics of digital devices perceived at the identity level?</p> <p>What is the effect of digital fatigue?</p>
Self Influence	<p>What influence do brand ambassadors have on consumers?</p> <p>What are the differences in Impact of influencers across industries?</p> <p>What types of products do brand influencers work best for?</p> <p>What impact does negative consumer influence have on brands?</p> <p>What are the causes of negative consumer influence vs. a brand?</p>

Source: elaboration from the narratives of our informants

## 4.2 Practitioners' further research questions

Future areas of research envisaged by practitioners concerning the relationship between digital technologies and consumer identity related to the following three themes: hybrid experiences, enthusiasm vs. avoidance, and self-influence. The research questions are summarized in Table 2.

### 4.2.1 Hybrid experiences

Managers emphasized the importance of looking at the personalization of the customer experience as a priority and at the enabling technologies of Industry 4.0 as tools for creating new hybrid consumer environments that will have a major impact in this domain. Managers' questions revolved around the awareness of being in a new phase of experimentation that has as its leverage new technologies and improved connection infrastructures. This calls for a greater understanding of the role of enabling technologies in consumption experiences, especially those related to phygital and the metaverse. To this point, practitioners expressed an interest in deepening their understanding of how enterprises can effectively use these technological tools to build hybrid spaces for consumers to encounter brands:

The part of hybridization is actually what will be the evolution of the concept of the metaverse, because I won't hide from you that here, the companies still

have not entered here. There are already, projects, in this area that is a much more theoretical area.

Thus, managers appeared to grasp the centrality of the issue in the theoretical discourse of consumer behavior relating, on the one hand, to the creation of hybrid consumption spaces (Mele et al., 2021) and, on the other hand, to the impact that the convergence of the digital and real has on consumers' identity construction (Šimůnková, 2019) and on the relationship with brands (Banik, 2021), which will require new tools and knowledge (Klaus, 2021).

#### 4.2.2 Enthusiasm vs. avoidance

Practitioners acknowledged consumers' increased reliance on the digital world since the start of the pandemic emergency, making it necessary to understand how COVID-19 has changed consumers' approach to digital:

2020–2021 has reinforced this, and it has led people on one side to a path of digitalization [that is] also strong and led to a discourse of a little bit of individualization (...) digitalization has allowed people to communicate with the outside world and, obviously, this has reinforced the need to create their own digital identity.

Managers showed an awareness that the pandemic has contributed to the disappearance of distinctions between being offline and online in many aspects of consumers' daily activities (Sheth, 2020). According to practitioners, this calls for further reflection on the value placed on the real dimension of consumption from an identity perspective (Leung et al., 2021) and whether it will increase consumer demand for physical-only experiences, whether this is a trend that can continue over time, or whether it is causing the opposite effect and leading consumers to experience “digital fatigue”:

because some digital fatigue presses in, beware of the risks of too much digital exposure. In my opinion, there is.

Managers' narratives further highlighted consumers' different approaches to digital, increasing the need for brands to improve the understanding of how technology impacts the construction of consumer–brand connections and how this varies among generations and types of consumers.

#### 4.2.3 Self-influence

Most of the interviewed managers believe that the role of influencers represents a topic of great interest that requires further study to examine the influence of brand ambassadors and influencers and how brand influencer–generated content influences consumers' buying attitude and brand involvement:

Actually, what is, in my opinion, very important when we see ... and relationship for brands and the discourse of the possible role of brand ambassadors, and it connects to a number of issues that can be, for example, concretely of user-generated content from the individual social side. So, it is the individual today that tells the brands. And so, it is sort of the opposite—a Copernican revolution.

Managers demonstrated an awareness of the effect of digital on consumer empowerment (Labrecque et al., 2013), focusing on the transformation of the consumer into a brand (Hearn, 2008) and on the identity connection experienced with influencers (Zogaj et al., 2021). This underlines the need for an operational deepening of the brand influencer concept and understanding of the mechanisms of influence. Managers also showed an interest in understanding the negative aspects of influence—namely, what is the cause of negative influence and what is the impact of negative consumer influence on brand reputation, as well as whether it is actually able to change attitudes toward a brand:

Then there is a whole negative part, actually—a strongly negative power. There are these double aspects and then in there also the whole concept of brand credibility, which is critical to go and give the consumer what they expect.

### 4.3 Implication for brands

The discourse of practitioners regarding the implications for brands arising from the new centrality of the consumer self-concept with digitization focused on four aspects: seamless positioning, consumer–brand relationship, brand values, and personalization.

#### 4.3.1 Seamless positioning

According to practitioners, digital is a reality that is part of everybody’s daily life and cannot be ignored by brands, which need to adapt quickly to the market changes taking place with the evolving digitalization scenario. This process emphasizes the consumer’s need in the purchasing journey to feel like a “Me” distinct from others (Chaplin & John, 2005; Escalas & Bettman, 2005):

In essence, however, the driven personalization of the customer journey (each individual has a unique and unrepeatable behavior online) produces significantly more complexity than in the past.

Managers expressed that digitization opens up new virtual spaces in which brands must position themselves that must be designed correctly in order to be enjoyed seamlessly by consumers (Verhoef et al., 2017). This implies the adoption of omnichannel strategies aimed at reconfiguring retail outlets to create greater continuity between “virtual” and “real” experiences:

Companies will have to identify omnichannel as one of the strategic themes for the future, developing and improving their presence in the digital world, taking

into account the constantly evolving trends and aiming for a new point of sale identity, so as to create greater continuity between the “virtual” and the “real” experience.

#### 4.3.2 Consumer–brand relationship

Practitioners also underlined implications for the consumer–brand relationship. The brand is called upon to manage a new relationship with the consumer that is reciprocal and interactive:

On the other hand, managing a two-way relationship with each person is increasingly important.

Brands must provide consumers with symbolic resources online that are necessary to meet the consumers’ need to express their self-image online (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Consequently, in digital brand storytelling, the brand is no longer the protagonist. Its role is ambivalent: it is the spectator and the orchestrator of the experience:

Customers love their self-promotion, and with digital storytelling, I have to make sure that we create opportunities where they certainly feel like telling their story.

Managers evinced that they recognize the active role the brand plays in constructing the relationship with the consumer through generating social value.

#### 4.3.3 Brand values

Practitioners also highlighted implications concerning brand values that result from this changed context of the brand–consumer relationship. They stated that digitalization has shifted the competitive arena from product and service to values:

Communication strategies that must represent consumer values, and thus the centrality of the self, affects the communication choices of brands.

Thus, with digitization, this relationship has become equal and guided by dialogue, speed, and continuous interaction. In this new brand context based on a personal and two-way relationship with the consumer, the brand is called upon to demonstrate the human qualities of frankness and transparency. These values become nodes in the relationship with the consumer that foster identification with the brand:

Consumer preferences increasingly fall on brands with which they identify, with which they share values and intentions.

Hence, managers appeared to grasp the transformation of brands into social entities with digitization (Vernuccio, 2018) and the centrality of brand anthropomorphism

in establishing a connection between the brand and the consumer's self-concept (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). They also indicated that the humanization of brands must evolve along a value-oriented pathway.

#### 4.3.4 Personalization

From a strategic perspective, practitioners seemed to focus on targeting. Interviewees agreed that digitization enables better targeting of consumers:

For companies, it becomes apparently much easier to intercept their targets through the precise reading of consumer behavior.

However, this means that brands are called upon to take greater responsibility for protecting their consumers' data and for balancing privacy and personalization, and protecting consumer data is one way of building future value for brands.

There is also a segment of the population, (...) who are asking, and this will be a growing trend, to be fully aware of what happens to their data, and perhaps of those brands who will have defended the privacy of their customers as best they can.

This reinforces the centrality of brand accountability in issues related to managing sensitive consumer information (Markos et al., 2018), and managers implied the need to balance data usage for targeting and privacy protection.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

This study investigated the impact of digitalization on the consumer self-concept and its implications for brands by adopting the marketing managers' lens. Results demonstrate that there is awareness among managers of the complexity that digital adds to market relationships and that digital has not only increased consumer empowerment (Labrecque et al., 2013) but has also ensured that company strategies must center the identity dimension of consumers. This confirms that the self still represents a valuable tool for understanding the market (Belk, 1987) that businesses must utilize.

The study enriches the theoretical discourse on self-concept in digitally enabled environments by evidencing the role of technology as an integral part of the individual's journey toward identity construction. This occurs seamlessly between the real and the digital. Such hybrid articulation of the consumer's self-concept (Šimůnková, 2019) represents a strategic asset for companies, as they can resort to consumer digital self-expression to better identify consumer emotions and traits (Matz & Netzer, 2017) to satisfy latent needs and add value to consumers' experience with brands. However, this projection of brands into the lives and narratives of individuals (Fournier, 1998) that the digital brings must proceed in step with the protection of sensitive consumer data (Markos et al., 2018) and its transparent management. Findings also suggest that smart technologies, especially those that underpin the construction of

hybrid environments (i.e., phygital and the metaverse) will increasingly represent key assets for improving the effectiveness of entrepreneurial efforts to build meaningful, lasting, and beneficial relationships with consumers across brands (Banik, 2021), but about which enterprises still need to acquire further knowledge. The recognition of the centrality of consumer identity with digitalization that emerged from the study also validates the human experience as an axis of the co-creation of value on a digital platform (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016), where the brand–consumer relationship is mediated by technology and enabled in the form of an assembly where the brand provides symbolic resources and artifacts with which the consumer can achieve their own self-expression and relational objectives (Wichmann et al., 2022). Results also suggest that an evolution is taking place in markets as a result of the presence of Industry 4.0 technologies in consumption environments. This emphasizes the need for a renewed alliance between business and research (Arnould et al., 2019) to define relevant topics to the advancement of marketing knowledge (Kohli & Haenlein, 2021), such as the hybridization of experience, with the new forms of phygital and metaverse, and its impact on the consumer’s self-concept, and how digitization changes the relationship between consumers and brands. Concerning the brand implications resulting from the focus on consumer self-concept that digitalization has added to the consumer–brand relationship, the study highlights that the brand identity must correspond to consumers’ expectations in terms of values and the transparency of messages. In digitally enabled environments, brands should also show their ability to express their own sociality in their relationships with consumers. In the end, as digitalization evolves, the need for companies to strengthen the brand–consumer relationship grows. Therefore, companies must redesign their market strategies by focusing, on the one hand, on fostering more intimate and human relationships with consumers through their brands (Park et al., 2013) and, on the other hand, on leveraging the power of data collection and processing across the network. This will enhance their analytical and strategic capabilities as well as their performance in the marketplace, enabling them to move beyond the concepts of segmentation and targeting and focus on the personalization of experience and on branding strategies that concentrate on human characteristics (Aaker, 1997) to communicate sound values and ethical behavior regarding consumer privacy.

## 6 Limitations and further research

This study had limitations. First, it involved a limited number of informants with common characteristics. In addition, the sample selection did not consider distinctions among sectors. To compensate for these limitations and corroborate the results, future research could extend the survey panel by including practitioners in other business fields by distinguishing between B2B and B2C markets and by comparing views among business fields. It would also be relevant to consider the perspectives of other relevant actors on this subject, such as academics, to extend the research outlook on the topic. Second, the study was conducted exclusively in Italy. Future investigations should employ cross-country analysis and even investigate how managers’ understandings can vary with respect to culture and age. Finally, the analysis was qualita-

tive. This suggests the need for future research employing quantitative techniques to collect data, such as online surveys or experimental design, to test the relationship between digitalization and consumer self-concept and their effects on the individual variables related to the brand that were highlighted in the present study.

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