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Francisco J. Martínez-López  
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# Advances in National Brand and Private Label Marketing

Eighth International Conference, 2021

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Editors

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# Preface

In just few months, the extraordinary events caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have modified profoundly our daily lives, the way we shop and, of course, the way of doing business, including FMCG and retail. The impact on the economy of COVID-19 deeper recession is unprecedented. The COVID-19 crisis is three times deeper than the 2009 economic downturn. In this context, change and uncertainty have never been as great as in the last few months. Whatever retailers thought they knew about customer behaviour is arguably brought into question.

Although every recession is different, there are common patterns learned from past recessions that might help retailers to doing the right thing for their customers in the 'next normal'. Firstly, there is a consumption migrating from branded [national] items to private label. Increasing unemployment figures are driving consumers make decisions more cautiously and carefully. Shoppers are more inclined to acquiring price information, making them more price conscious. In this context, private labels seem to take a better advantage of consumers' desire to cut their grocery bills and are a cost-effective option for savvy shoppers in tough times. Nevertheless, private label risk is high when differentiation is low retailers, so they are advised to drive trust and brand recognition in their unique private label programmes.

Because of consumers' budget constraints, COVID-19 may have caused shoppers favouring value channels such as discounters. Expansion programmes of this format may be a sign of their channel's future dominance with a move towards further diversification in the form of fresh and ambient groceries. Economic outlook will also hit assortment sizes. Retailers and manufacturers have been negotiating on SKU listings for many years. Now retailers feel they have the proof that less is more. However, shoppers still want to have choice with national brands, so retailers are advised to focus on the right mix of brands and private label that drive the category revenue, at the store level for each type of shopper profile.

COVID-19 pandemic characteristics also bring unique challenges. A new retail scenario in which local retailers and the online channel are set to play a more significant role is emerging. The word has gone local. During periods of lockdown, proximity becomes critical and is expected to maintain it. Regional and local

supermarkets and convenience stores have enjoyed exceptional growth in 2020. Almost seventy percent of shoppers globally now prefer shopping in stores close to home, and more than half of consumers are more in favour of buying goods and services that have been produced in their own country. And we expect this to continue and boost.

COVID-19 has also added new outlooks to the challenge of integrating the online–offline shopping environment. Although some retailers were already moving fast, many—specially groceries—were not beating clearly on e-commerce. But now they are doing. During the first 2 months of the pandemic, ecommerce grew by the same amount as in the 5 previous years. Ecommerce acceleration across markets is coming from a new customer profile: older and rural shoppers. The more stringent lockdown measures for the former and the need for being further for the latter are leading ecommerce to get the natural channel to turn to. Nevertheless, retailers should not forget about the physical store, as it still offers great opportunities. Consumers have made significant changes to their shopping behaviour, moving from shopping across multiple (physical) retailers to picking up all their items in a single trip to a store. Seeking for optimizing their safety and keeping social distance, shoppers visit the store as little as possible. In this context, retailers are advised to re-design their physical space where items must be touched, compared, and handled in such a way that the likelihood of infecting is as low as possible. Given the decrease in the number of times the shopper visits the store, retailers should increase consumers' experience at the point-of-sale and make an emotional connection with their customers. In brief, the COVID-19 pandemic recession is likely to have unique and especially more persistent characteristics which retailers must learn from and anticipate seizing new opportunities.

Looking at those aspects underlying this new marketing context offers exciting opportunities for researchers. It is with this goal in mind that this Eighth International Conference on Research on National Brand & Private Label Marketing (NB&PL 2021) has been launched and organized. After the success of the seven previous editions, this eighth edition is still believed to be a unique international forum to present and discuss original, rigorous, and significant contributions on topics related to any retailing, private label, or national brand issues.

Each paper submitted to NB&PL 2021 has gone through a stringent peer review process by members of the Program Committee, comprising 46 internationally renowned researchers from 15 countries.

A total of 15 papers have been accepted, and they address diverse areas of application such as branding strategies, innovation in private labels, brand equity, omnichannel strategies, COVID-19 consequences, promotions, consumer decision-making, social media, CSR initiatives, and online grocery retailing, among others. A wide variety of theoretical and methodological approaches have been used in these areas.

We believe that this eighth edition has continued with the same goals as the seven previous editions: promote, stimulate, and publish high-quality contributions on national brands and private labels, which could help retailers and manufacturers deal with diversity of issues, especially with those related to the impact of

COVID-19. Nevertheless, we hope to keep organizing this conference which is aimed to become an international reference for advancing this promising research field.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the support of the sponsors *University of Barcelona, Information Resources Inc. (IRI), Manufacturers-and-Retailers Spanish Multisectoral Association (AECOC), EAE Business School and IMD Business School*. We would also like to thank all the contributing authors, members of the Program Committee and the rest of the Organizing Committee for their highly valuable work in enabling the success of this eighth edition of NB&PL. Thanks for your generous contribution—IC-NB&PL 2021 would not have been possible without you all.

Francisco J. Martínez-López  
Juan Carlos Gázquez-Abad



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# Private Label and Brand Equity. Opportunities in New Trends

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**Abstract.** The global pandemic has reshaped the scenario for marketing organizations across several industries, as the former apparently represents one of the most remarkable environmental changes in modern marketing history, with relevant consequences on consumer behaviour. Overall, the latter had more time at home, which resulted in new habits and new opportunities of engagement. In this context it is becoming more and more important to study the relationship between the magnitude of brand loyalty and store loyalty as PLs enhance customer store loyalty. PLs have been able to build brand equity throughout their development, with considerable differences across product categories. The aim of the paper is to analyse the components of Private Label equity and the positive relation between PL loyalty and store loyalty: PLs enhance customer store loyalty, setting the basis for further research in this field. Higher level of PL brand equity reduces the price competition between PLs and NBs and enhances their differentiation, which allows more market power for both.

**Keywords:** PL loyalty · Brand equity · Store loyalty · New trends

## 1 Introduction

Traditionally, leading national brands (NB) and private labels (PLs) belonged to different strategic groups. Consequently, national manufacturing brands never really had to take private labels into account when formulating their brand strategies; their focus would be on the competition with other national brands.

The quality gap between the two has decreased, and consequently new strategic reactions by leading manufacturers are required (Morris and Nightingale 1980).

Private labels are owned and sold by the same retailer that markets the manufacturer's leading brand, and retailers and suppliers have different promotional objectives. Suppliers perform marketing communication to promote their brand, to increase awareness, and improve sales and loyalty. Retailers, on the other hand, are not generally as concerned about the performance of a single brand, as they are likely offering alternative brands within a product category. The focus of their interest will be the performance of the category as a whole and the sales of self-branded products.

Before COVID-19, distributors could not count on competitive advantage based on the geographic position, forced to new positioning elements interpreting new demands:

the product lines with high levels of differentiation represent an opportunity for PLs to build brand equity. Even NBs do not generally directly attack private labels using price reductions, but by introducing innovations and strengthening the brand. The results of an empirical study using a sample of 101 Dutch national brand manufacturers suggest that national brands should increase the distance from private labels through innovations and brand strengthening (Verhoef, Nijssen, and Sloot 2002).

A higher level of PL brand equity reduces the price competition between PLs and NBs and enhances their differentiation, which allows more market power for both (Amrouche et al. 2008).

## 2 PL Brand Equity

PL brand equity includes components such as perceived brand quality, CSR, brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand associations (e.g. Beneke and Zimmerman 2014). The PL brand equity research shows two key antecedents to preserve brand equity: store image and perceived price (de Wulf et al. 2005). Store image is determined by the product mix, pricing, store location, physical facilities, and customer service (Lee and Hyman 2008). The perceived price is a more powerful influencer than store image (Beneke and Zimmerman 2014). Store image can be used by retailers to influence all components of store brand equity (Beristain and Zorrilla 2011).

PLs enhance customer store loyalty (Hansen and Singh 2008). However, the relationship between PLs and store loyalty tends to be quite situational (Martos-Partal and Gonzalez-Benito 2011) and complicated (Koschate-Fischer et al. 2014). PLs can play a role in increasing store-switching costs, which leads to greater store differentiation and better retailer loyalty (Corstjens and Lal 2000). Seenivasan, Sudhir, and Talukdar (2016) demonstrated a robust and positive relationship between PL loyalty and store loyalty. However, PL impact on loyalty may not always be significant, depending on the retailers' market positioning. Over time, the loyalty factors that contribute to store loyalty are not homogeneous across the different loyalty stages as well (do Vale and Matos 2017). In addition, studies also show that the relationship between PL share and store loyalty is more complicated than what previous research has suggested (Koschate-Fischer et al. 2014).

By introducing PLs, the retailer abandons its pure status of being a client to become a direct competitor with NB manufacturers (Pauwels and Srinivasan 2004). The competition between NBs and PLs has become one of the main research streams in PL management (Brazauskaitė and Auruskeviciene; Gerbutaviciene 2014). While past analytical work suggests PLs should not be promoted (Rao 1991), practical evidence shows some retailers do promote PLs (Dunne and Narasimhan 1999). Similarly, either NB manufacturers or retailers may implement appropriate advertising programs to improve brand equity.

There is a great deal of theoretical modelling research published on this topic, including several excellent literature review and meta-analysis papers about broad economic/analytical models in studying NB-PL competition (e.g., Sethuraman 2009; Sethuraman and Raju 2012; Ailawadi et al. 2010).

PL brands are found to be in a weak competitive position compared to NBs regardless of the category and retail chain brand assortment strategies (Juhl et al. 2006). But since

retailers essentially control the entire marketing mix for PLs and much of that for NBs sold at their stores, the role of PLs in this context is rather complicated. While retailers may favour their PLs by making NBs less attractive, doing so engenders risks of losing category profit as well as overall competitiveness to rivals (Akcura et al. 2019). A research shows that PLs can mitigate the promotion competition between the NBs and possibly provide benefits for all members in the channel (Wu and Wang 2005).

For retailers, advertising is found to have an indirect impact on perceived quality of PL products (Levy and Gendel-Guterman 2012) and can be an important consideration to build a strong PL.

## 2.1 Forecasts: Italian Trends

The 2021 forecasts are the result of two surveys conducted in December 2020 by the Rapporto Coop 2020 - Economia, consumi e stili di vita degli italiani di oggi e di domani and its partners. The first, realized using the CAWI method, involved a sample of 800 individuals representing the population between 18 and 65 years. The second survey “2021 Restart. The new start for Italy and the Italians” turned to the community of the [italiani.coop](http://italiani.coop) website and involved 700 opinion leaders and market makers using the past editions of the Report. Among these, the survey involved 280 subjects with managerial/executive profiles (entrepreneurs, CEOs and directors, freelancers) able to anticipate more than others the future trends in the country.

The surveys confirm the long wave of “slow cooking” the new strategy by Italians to spend less, buy more basic ingredients and less ready-made dishes, and temporarily defend quality and healthiness of their food, often cooking it on their own and planning to devote more time to preparing meals.

Purchases will focus more on food produced with Italian and natural/sustainable raw materials (53% and 48% of the sample respectively believe that these categories will record the best performance compared to the previous year) as well as fresh ingredients (+52%).

The concept of sustainable product becomes more articulated and the general respect for the environment is accompanied by the concept of local production or production linked to the territory.

The digital jump does not stop, but instead finds new lymph even in the 2021 forecast: almost one Italian out of two will invest in new smartphones, tablets, PCs, smart TVs; and even online payments, e-grocery and delivery will be growingly frequent. Italians seem to be increasingly looking for new, actually smart solutions (Rapporto Coop 2020 - Economia, consumi e stili di vita degli italiani di oggi e di domani).

Even in the 2021 scenario, the most critical points according to the managers of the food supply chain are, especially, the threat of the economic crisis and its negative effects on final demand (27% predicts a decline in purchases of food or consumer goods), and in 2021 – with the gradual exhaustion of the health emergency – a 2.6% decline (–1.6% if you also consider e-commerce) in the turnover of the physical network of large retailers is expected.

Positive trends in the physical network are only expected for discount stores (+1.8%) and drug stores (+2.9%). The South is certainly in greater difficulty, while the loss of the

northern regions will be less pronounced also thanks to the strong growth of e-commerce that is concentrated in such territories.

A strong growth in the online market in 2021 is once again expected (+62% is the Nielsen estimate of increase in 2021 online sales) along with the opportunity to give better service to consumers, but at the same time such channel risks cannibalizing the physical network and adding additional costs to the already rather precarious budget balances of the sector.

### 3 Opportunities to Enhance Differentiation of PL Brand Equity

The green sensitivity of Italians is the first area on which PLs are strongly investing, and this was reconfirmed by sales both during and after the lockdown. The organic product brand *Vivi Verde* (Coop PL) is the first organic brand sold in large-scale distribution in Italy with a turnover above 150 million in 2019, and it has not ceased to grow during and after the lockdown, with a +9% increase in value (Rapporto Coop 2020 - Economia, consumi e stili di vita degli italiani di oggi e di domani).

Coop continues to work on its offer in this direction, by strengthening the assortment with advanced and innovative Coop products in terms of quality and sustainability, affordable and accessible to the weak sections of society, and redesigning the stores following the logic of the new needs shown by the population.

Retailers have responded to the ethical concerns of consumers by developing products that meet their concerns and by changing the way in which they operate as organizations. For some, a strategy of differentiation on the basis of operating sustainably and ethically has been indeed implemented. Ethical retailers can lead the way towards achieving the triple bottom line by ensuring that the production methods and supply chains used to get products on the market are socially sustainable, thus do not exploit workers and further the well-being of people and communities. They can also ensure that supply chains are sustainable by minimizing their environmental impact.

For ethical consumers, lower priced alternatives are not acceptable substitutes. Good practice, cost benefits, and the support of the growing ethical concern by consumers will ensure the commercial sustainability of ethical retailing in the future.

### 4 Conclusions and Future Research

In conclusion, it would be helpful for future research to investigate these important results, possibly using moderating factors such as market and category characteristics, business environment, and social/cultural factors.

There are two conclusions presented in our earlier discussions which could be widely clarified and generalized:

- (1) the role of store image in influencing PL brand equity: increasing the frequency of visits to the store is an opportunity to generate a virtuous circle between store loyalty and PL brand equity.

Vice versa, PL brand equity enhances customer store loyalty (Hansen and Singh 2008), setting the basis for further research in this field;



- (2) Higher level of PL brand equity reduces the price competition between PLs and NBs and enhances their differentiation, which allows more market power for both (Amrouche et al. 2008).

It would be interesting to see how retailers optimize the allocation of marketing budget, among different categories. What is the retailer's optimal pricing and promotion strategy in conjunction with the NB manufacturer's marketing activities? (Karray and Martin-Herran 2009). How might intra-store competition be optimally balanced? The cross-brand advertising impact (between PLs and NBs) and CSR can be another stimulating future research topic.

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