How much do you love chocolate? The Validation of the Chocolate Brands Relationship Scale

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Resumo
Although the chocolate market has become increasingly larger and more competitive, no studies were found to evaluate the relationship with clients in this market. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to validate the Chocolate Brands Relationship Scale (CBR Scale) to identify and measure the main aspects perceived by chocolate brands' customers as relevant in their relationship with such brands. We conducted a survey with 523 consumers, and data was analyzed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis. The CBR Scale has 21 items divided into three factors: Brand Trust, Shopping Experience and Perceived Quality. As contributions, we present a valid and reliable instrument from which further research on customer relationship management, branding strategies, brand loyalty, and brand experience in the chocolate market can be built. Managerially, the CBR Scale is a valid instrument for practitioners and managers in the chocolate sector to access customers, establishing and developing long-term relationships with them.

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Abstract

Although the chocolate market has become increasingly larger and more competitive, no studies were found to evaluate the relationship with clients in this market. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to validate the Chocolate Brands Relationship Scale (CBR Scale) to identify and measure the main aspects perceived by chocolate brands' customers as relevant in their relationship with such brands. We conducted a survey with 523 consumers, and data was analyzed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis. The CBR Scale has 21 items divided into three factors: Brand Trust, Shopping Experience and Perceived Quality. As contributions, we present a valid and reliable instrument from which further research on customer relationship management, branding strategies, brand loyalty, and brand experience in the chocolate market can be built. Managerially, the CBR Scale is a valid instrument for practitioners and managers in the chocolate sector to access customers, establishing and developing long-term relationships with them.

Keywords: customer-brand relationship, relationship marketing, branding.

Introduction

Chocolate consumption has changed in the past years from a commodity product to a self-indulgent treat (Rousseau, 2011), a symbolic consumption product (Belk & Costa, 1998), a consumption experience (Jeon, Yoo, & Kim, 2020), a high luxury good (Kim & Jeon, 2020) and even an addiction (Zarantonello & Luomala, 2011). This transformation in consumer behavior is linked to the expansion of the brands in this sector, from the supermarket treats to gift boxes, from dark chocolate to the sweetest flavours, and from handcrafted to sophisticated chocolate (Kazemi & Esmaeili, 2020). Consequently, competition has increased, leading brands to invest in branding strategies in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantages in this market (Hossien, 2011).

One of the main goals of a branding strategy is to foster relationships between brands and consumers (Khamitov, Wang, & Thomson, 2019), context in which relational strategies have contributed to promote affective and emotional bonds between consumers and brands and, from this, foster long-term relationships (Gómez-Suárez, Martínez-Ruiz, & Martínez-Caraballo, 2017), creating relational benefits for both parts (Grönroos, 2017). This is a topic of major interest in marketing literature (Fetscherin, Guzman, Veloutsou, & Cayolla, 2019), since the relationship between brands and customers is known to promote brand attachment, brand passion and commitment to the brand, important predictors of brand loyalty, conducting brands' performance in the long-term (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015).

From this discussion, it is reasonable to say that the relational strategies are a paramount element for chocolate brands differentiation, leading us to the relationship marketing research and its focus in attracting, maintaining and developing relationships with customers, a process based in transforming indifferent customers in loyal customers to the brand (Berry, 1983). This means that consumers, in order to relate with a brand, considers not only the tangible attributes, encompassing intangible characteristics such as the positive associations and perception about a specific brand (Grönroos, 2017). In this sense, relationship marketing is an adequate path to investigate the relationship between customers and chocolate brands, since consumers' decision for these brands are based in the taste, texture, flavor, price and product size (Thaichon Jebarajakirthy, Tatuu, & Gajbhiyeb, 2018) and also in hedonic aspects like the psychological meaning of eating chocolate, the emotional aspect of consumption and the gratification feeling brought by chocolate (Zaratonello & Luomala, 2011).

However, research has signaled that customer loyalty is associated with the product itself, not to a specific brand, meaning that consumers may seek for the product and not for the brand (Kuikka & Laukkanen, 2012), setting for chocolate brands the imperative of differentiation. Moreover, the chocolate market has become increasingly larger and more competitive, representing a possible pleasure and even a stress reliever in times of pandemic and social isolation. However, no confirmatory studies have been found that aim to access the relationship with customers in this vibrant and attractive market, constituting a literature gap. Based on the possibilities brought by relational strategies as drivers of several branding dimensions, we wonder: what are the main aspects of chocolate brands that consumers perceive as relevant in their relationship with such brands?

To address this question, the main purpose of this paper is to obtain validity evidence for the Chocolate Brands Relationship Scale - CBR Scale, an unprecedented scientific instrument that enables the identification and measurement of the main aspects perceived by chocolate brands' customers as relevant in their relationship with such brands.

Theoretical Background

The seminal paper of Susan Fournier, in 1998, has initiated a research tradition dedicated to the relationship between consumers and their brands (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008; Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015). The relationship between consumers and brands starts in the lived experience (Fournier, 1998), based on the opinions, attitudes, feelings, perceptions and evaluations the consumer has about the brand (Fetscherin et al., 2019). However, as proposed by Allen et al. (2008), the understanding of brands and their relationship with the public must go beyond branding strategies in order to maintain competitiveness, covering aspects that address consumers, corporate strategies and the cultural background.

In this context, relationship marketing, a business philosophy that promotes and enhances the relationship between companies, customers and partners with the objective of creating relations value for the involved actors (Scussel, Petroll, Semprebon, & Rocha, 2017) can be a helpful path into better understanding the customer-brand relationship. The adoption and implementation of relational strategies, that intend to approximated customers and brands, has proved to be an important driver of new products development (Enst, Hoyer, Krafft, & Krieger, 2011), innovative capacity (Battor & Battor, 2010), consumer satisfaction (Abbade, 2014), commitment to the brand (Walsh, Winterich, & Mittal, 2010), consumer loyalty (Kauffman Loureiro, & Manarioti, 2016) and brands' profit and market share (Khamitov et al., 2019).

Accessing a bigger share of consumers' "heart, mind, and wallet" (Storbacka & Lehtinen, 2001, p. 23) remains as a contemporary challenge of relational strategies. According to Grönroos (2017), companies must develop a relationship marketing readiness in order to maintain and enhance relationships with consumers, which means to broaden their touchpoints and interactions. The product is only in part responsible for consumer value, indicating the need of providing better service along with emotional connection (Grönroos, 2017). The best way to do it, as indicated by Gómez-Suárezet al. (2017), is to focus on taking care of consumers, understanding them not merely as consumers, but as complex human beings, accessing what they are looking for when choosing a brand between many other brands in the market.

In the relationship marketing research, a recent literature review confirms the focus on consumers as the main driver of organizational results, indicating customer loyalty as one of the main trends to be addressed by the role of branding, loyalty programs and the use of social media as a relational tool (Enes, Lima, Demo, & Scussel, 2020). These results are in line with the meta-analysis of Fetscherin and Heinrich (2015) and the literature review published by Gómez-Suárez et al. (2017) on customer-brand relationship, both addressing relational strategies to be closer to customers and develop strong and lasting bonds with them.

Furthermore, the efforts of the Journal of Product & Brand Management in publishing a special issue dedicated only to the latest research on brand relationships reinforce the relevance of relationship marketing to access consumers' opinions, attitudes, feelings and behaviors, understanding the actions to be followed in order to reach consumers' preference and loyalty (Fetscherin et al., 2019).

In this regard, brands need to focus on identifying and understanding consumers' needs, habits, and lifestyles, enabling the creation of value proposals in consumers' perception (Grönroos, 2009; Grönroos, 2017). Grönroos (2009) affirms that consumer perception is the first step into developing a relationship, since there will be no relationship if consumers do not recognize the nature of such bonds. Similarly, Fournier and Alvarez (2012) shed light into the dialogue between consumers' perception and its effect on customer-brand relationships, suggesting that the way consumers perceive a brand can influence the way they relate to the brand. This discussion led us to customer perception, a relationship marketing construct proposed by Demo and Rozzett (2010) as the main aspects perceived by consumers that enables the establishment and the development of long-term relationships. Their contribution was a scale to measure customer relationship perception under the business-to-consumer perspective, which was further validated in the United States (Demo & Rozzett, 2013) and France (Demo, Watanabe, Chauvet, & Rozzett, 2017), certifying its validity and reliability, in other words, its capacity of measuring customer relationship perception.

On the top of it, the validation of this scale for specific sectors such as luxury brands (Scussel & Demo, 2019), airline brands (Demo, Rozzett, Fogaça, & Souza, 2018) and games (Demo, Batelli, & Albuquerque, 2015) raised the possibility of validating a scale customized for the chocolate brands sector, a large retail sector, being its consumption being a combination of tangible and intangible factors, which calls for specific attention to the particularities of this segment.

Methodological Procedures

This paper reports a survey with customers of chocolate brands with the purpose of getting validity evidence of the Chocolate Brands Relationship Scale - CBR Scale, using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA).

A previous exploratory study of the CBR Scale in 2020 has reached an instrument of 30 items (Demo, Garcia, Bastos, & Scussel, 2020), which will be subject to CFA in the present research. An electronic survey using the platform Google Forms was answered by 601 Brazilian consumers of chocolate brands, an adequate number to perform CFA, in line with the criteria of 10 to 20 subjects per item of the scale (Byrne, 2016; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2014; Kline, 2016), considering the number of items of the original scale. The questionnaire was formed by the initial question "please, write the name of your favorite chocolate brand", followed by the 30 objective items regarding the relationship between consumer and brand, ending with sociodemographic questions in order to characterize the sample.

Data was analyzed in the software *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS). The first step of data analysis was a data treatment phase, following the guidance of Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), encompassing descriptive statistics. Next, performing the listwise procedure to identify missing values, 40 questionnaires were excluded. By using the Mahalanobis method in order to diagnose outliers, another 38 questionnaires were excluded, based on the chi-square table, with a significance index of $p < 0.001$ and considering 30 variables, with a resulting value of $\chi^2 = 59.703$.

Additionally, we analyzed multicollinearity and singularity, and no problems were detected for the sample. Lastly, we tested the assumptions for the use of multivariate analysis, as established by Hair et al. (2014). Data were analyzed using statistical tests, normal

probability plots, residual plots, histogram and P-P Plot, in order to verify normality, linearity and homoscedasticity of the data. Univariate and multivariate normality was also verified according to Marôco's criteria (2010), using Amos statistical program. All the assumptions were confirmed.

The final sample after the treatment phase was composed by 523 subjects, in line with the statistical criteria presented above. The sample of the study is predominantly between 18 and 25 years old (54%), with college degree (32%), being consumers of the chosen chocolate brand for 5-10 years (37%), with an eventual average frequency of purchase (65%).

Findings

In order to validate the Chocolate Brands Relationship Scale - CBR Scale, we performed the evaluation of the fit of a measurement model for the customer-brand relationship in the chocolate brands sector, using confirmatory factor analysis, via structural equation modeling (SEM), using the maximum likelihood estimation method. The choice of this method was justified by the fact that this is the most used estimation method in SEM, given its robustness regarding problems of normality and effectiveness in different sample sizes (Hair et al., 2014).

The test of the measurement model with the structure of 30 items revealed the following fit indexes: NC=6.62; CFI=0.70; and RMSEA=0.10. However, satisfactory values for a structural model must meet the following criteria, according to Kline (2016): NC (CMIN/DF) must range between 2.0 and 3.0 and, at most, up to 5.0; CFI must be equal to or greater than 0.90; and RMSEA must be less than 0.06 or even 0.08. Thus, subsequent analyzes were necessary for the indexes to meet the criteria indicated as satisfactory.

First, we evaluated the factorial loads of the items, identifying the correlation of the items with their respective factors (Field, 2009).The items 5, 15, 19, 20, 26 and 29 had low factor loads, below 0.45, being considered "poor" items (Comrey & Lee, 2013). Following the guidance of Hair et al. (2014), these items were excluded from the model. We established a minimum load of 0.55 to keep in the model only good, very good and excellent quality items (Comrey & Lee, 2013).

To improve the adjustment obtained through the CFA, we analyzed the highest modification indices (M.I.) values, according to the guidelines of Kline (2016). The M.I. suggested between the errors of the variables R16 (In the stores of this chocolate brand, I do not take long in the queue to pay) and R17 (In the stores of this chocolate brand, I am quickly assisted) was 311.40. The M.I. between R4 (This chocolate brand offers me personalized service) and R6 (I feel like a special customer for this chocolate brand) was 141.10. Therefore, a double arrow was introduced between the errors of the mentioned variables.

After adjustment, the item 16 presented a low factor load, less than 0.45, being excluded from the model. We also introduced a double arrow between the errors of the variables R18 (This chocolate brand has environmental preservation programs/actions) and R22 (This chocolate brand is recognized for its social responsibility), based on a suggested M.I. of 82.19. Additionally, in an attempt to further improve the fit, we decided to remove item R17 from the model since it had a factor load lower than 0.55.

Based on the described adjustments, we obtained the final indexes of the model: $\chi 2(184) = 646.72$; $p<0.001$; NC=3.52; CFI = 0.91; and RMSEA=0.07, with a very satisfactory fit. Figure 1 illustrates the CBR Scale model, with the respective fit parameters.
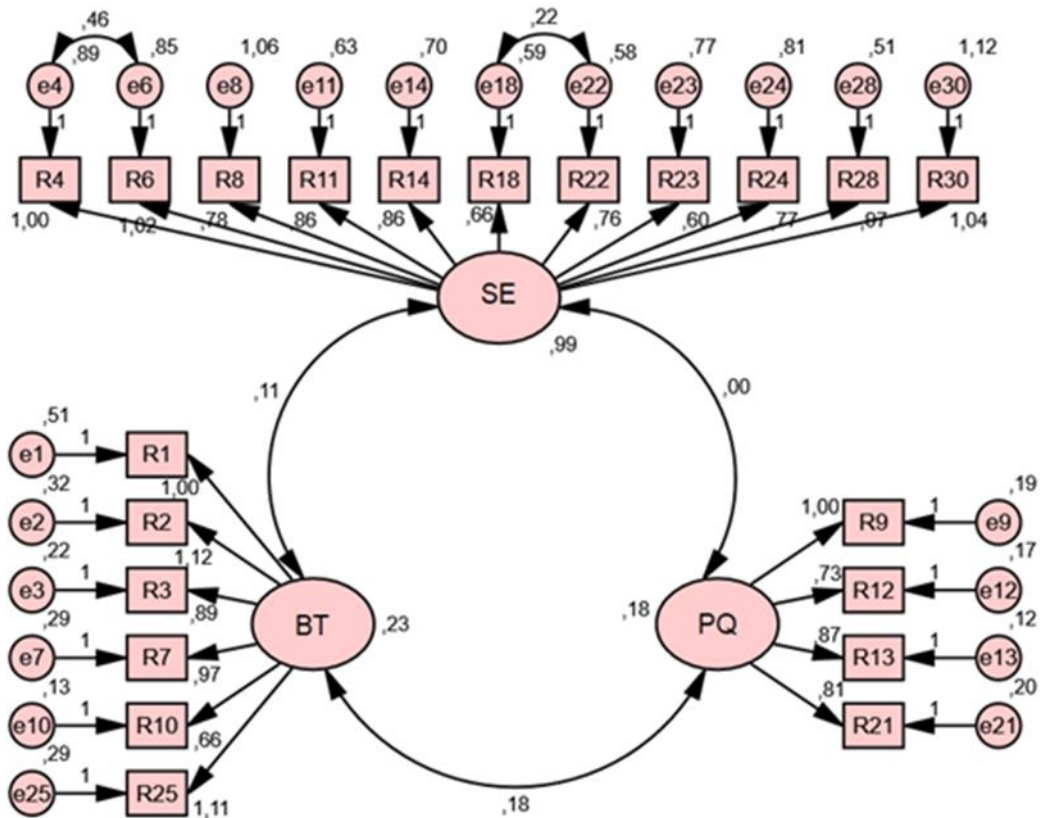
Figure 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis for the CBR Scale
Note. χ2(184)=646.72; p<0.001; NC=3.52; CFI=0.91; RMSEA=0.07

Next, we analyzed the internal validity, or the quality of the scale, by investigating the factorial loads of its items. Our findings revealed items with factor loads ranging from 0.56 to 0.80. Thus, the model has only good, very good and excellent items (Comrey & Lee, 2013), demonstrating good quality in the loads and, therefore, internal validity of CBR Scale (Hair et al., 2014).

In the following, we tested reliability, using the Jöreskog Rho (ρ), a reliability measure more recommended than Cronbach's alpha for SEM, since it has the factorial loads as reference, rather than the correlations observed between the variables (Chin, 1998). The factor "Brand Trust" obtained ρ=0.82; the factor "Shopping Experience" obtained ρ=0.91; and, finally, the factor "Perceived Quality" presented ρ=0.75. Therefore, following the criterion of Chin (1998), in which the index must be greater than 0.7, the scale has satisfactory indices and can be considered reliable. Additionally, the variance extracted from the three factors (Brand Trust=0.43; Shopping Experience=0.48; and Perceived Quality=0.44), although not ideal, they have reached the minimum of 0.4, recommended by Hair et al. (2014).

Subsequently, we tested convergent, discriminant and nomological validity in order to reach construct validity for the CBR Scale. The validity of a construct concerns how much a set of measurement items explains the theoretical construct that the construct should measure (Hair et al., 2014). Convergent validity is the degree of agreement between the items and their factor (Hair et al., 2014), being obtained through the analysis of three main indicators: factorial loads, Joreskog's Rho, and extracted variance. All the items of the model reached loads above 0.55, meeting the criteria of a minimum of 0.5 (Cohen, 1992). Furthermore, the CBR Scale has all Jöreskog Rho's above 0.7, satisfying the criteria for convergent validity proposed by Hair et al. (2014). As for the extracted variance of each factor of the scale, the CBR Scale has reached the recommendations of a minimum of 0.4 (Hair Jr., Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014). On that basis, the scale has convergent validity.

We also tested discriminant validity, or the degree in which each scale measures a different construct, in other words, if the factors explain different constructs. The discriminant validity occurs when the estimated extracted variance of each factor is greater than the square of the correlation between them (values below the diagonal), according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Hair et al., 2014), who says that a latent construct should explain its item measurements better than another construct. Results indeed confirm the discriminant validity between the three factors of the scale, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
CBR Scale Discriminant Validity

Factor	Brand Trust (BT)	Shopping Experience (SE)	Perceived Quality (PQ)
Brand Trust (BT)	0,43[a]		
Shopping Experience (SE)	0,01	0,48 [a]	
Perceived Quality (PQ)	0,03	0	0,44 [a]

Note. [a] extracted variance

To access nomological validity, we analyzed the behavior of the scale in relation to other constructs as predicted in both theoretical and empirical literature (Hair et al., 2014). We tested the correlations between constructs, in the light of the theory of relationship marketing, by calculating the mean of the answers given by the individuals to the items of the final model of the scale, which measures the relationship perception regarding the chocolate brands, and correlated it to the average of the results of the answers given to the Net Promote Score (NPS) question, an index that, according to the Reichheld (2011), aims to measure the degree of customer satisfaction.

The results demonstrated, through Pearson's coefficient, a significant and strong correlation (0.568) at the 0.01 level between the two constructs (relationship and satisfaction), endorsing the results of previous work that indicate that it is possible to identify a significant and strong correlation between satisfaction and relationship constructs (Festcherin et al., 2019; Jamshidi & Rousta, 2021; Velostsou, 2015;). Besides, customer satisfaction is one of the main guiding assumptions of relationship marketing (Scussel et al., 2017), as well as an important component of customer relationship management (Alkhouri, 2012).

Finally, even though the scale has shown good signs of validity and reliability, in addition to construct validity, it is important to also achieve content validity, that is, the items need to be supported theoretically. All the 21 items in the CBR scale present theoretical support.

Discussion, Implications, Limitations and Research Agenda
The main purpose of this paper was to validate the Chocolate Brands Relationship Scale - CBR Scale in order to identify and measure the main aspects chocolate brands' customers perceive as relevant in their relationship with such brands. As a result, the CBR Scale is composed by 21 items divided into three factors: Brand Trust (6 items), Shopping Experience (11 items) and Perceived Quality (4 items).

The factor **Brand Trust** covers the items related to consumers' perception about the reputation of the brand, consumers' willingness to repurchase and word-of-mouth, indicating a reliable brand. In the context of brands, trust concerns how much the customer sees the brand as reliable, meaning the brand will perform as expected, conforming a sense of security for consumers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In this sense, literature signalizes that consumers tend to build relationships with brands based on how much trust the brand evokes (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015). As proposed by Grönroos (2009), the ability of brands to keep the promises made to consumers is one of the main aspects of relational strategies. In addition, trust is a

building block of relationship marketing (Scussel et al., 2017), being also an important driver of customer loyalty, the main objective of brands' relational strategies (Khamitov et al., 2019).

For its turn, the factor **Shopping Experience** encompasses tangible and intangible aspects of the interaction between consumers and brands during the consumer journey, including purchase and after purchase experience, including service, assistance, communication and consumers' perception on the branding efforts to promote their interaction. These aspects are related to the multiple touchpoints between customers and brands that create the experience with the brand (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The items in this factor are in line with literature, since brand experience is a set of sensations, feelings and behavioral responses from consumers to brands' efforts, including brands' tangible and intangible elements (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zaratonello, 2009). In line with the relational paradigm of relationship marketing, research on brand experience confirms the influence of consumer experience with affective commitment to the brand and loyalty (Iglesis, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011). Furthermore, chocolate consumption generates complex consumption experiences due to the subjectivity involved in this type of consumption, which is motivated by physiological need, sensorial gratification and escapism (Zarantonello & Luomala, 2011), being aspects a brand must rely on in order to build a long-term relationship with customers.

Finally, the factor **Perceived Quality** concerns consumers' perception on the quality of the products and the quality of the environment in which they interact with the brand. In the case of chocolate, quality is associated with flavour, value for money, packaging and place of purchase (Zarantonello & Luomala, 2011), confirming such aspects are connected to customer-brand relationships. In the case of the retail store, research has previously confirmed the impact of perceived quality on brands' purchase intention (Calvo-Porral & Lévy-Mangin, 2017). Moreover, perceived quality has proved to be an important antecedent of brand loyalty, increasing brand equity and, from this, the maintenance of brands' competitive advantages (Golkar, Golkar, AbbasianKasgari, & HosseiniToudeshki , 2014).

Based on the above discussion about the relation between the three factors that compose the CBR Scale and the theoretical background on both customer-brand relationship and relationship marketing, we foresee a few implications of our findings. Theoretically, this research contributes with academic knowledge by proposing a scientific instrument, presenting confirmatory validity indexes under the relational paradigm of marketing on the B2C context, the CBR Scale, which will allow future works on branding strategies, brand loyalty and brand experience. Apart from, the three factors present three independent scales, due to the confirmed discriminant validity, enabling relational studies with other marketing variables. Managerially, the CBR Scale is a valid instrument for marketing practitioners and branding managers in the chocolate sector to strategize the best way of accessing customers, establishing and developing relationships based on the main elements consumers perceive as relevant in such relationship, building an effective path to their loyalty.

Regarding the limitations of the study and a subsequent agenda, a first limitation is that the present findings are therefore indicative rather than conclusive. In spite of the scale's validation in Brazil, it would be useful to further access the generalizability of the CBR Scale to other business environments and different cultures and countries. In addition, with more replicative and creative research, an improved comprehensive conceptual framework related to relationship marketing can be developed in the future. In this meaning, there could be a need of alteration or deletion of original items even to improve the extracted variance of the factors.

Another limitation is due to the cross-sectional design, so that questions regarding causality remain unanswered. In this sense, the development of a time-series database and the testing of the CBR Scale and its antecedents and consequents in a longitudinal framework would provide more insights into probable causation. We also recommend the validation of the

scale in other sectors in an effort to cover the specificities of each context, particularly those of experiential consumption such as food and beverage brands, restaurants and hotels.

Conclusion

We may conclude, in spite of the limitations pointed, that the main objective of this study was reached and an instrument to assess what aspects customers rank as relevant concerning their relationship with chocolate brands was produced. The CBR Scale has internal validity, reliability, construct validity and content validity, constituting a valid and reliable operational measure to be applied in relational studies in the areas of marketing and consumer behavior, as well as represents a diagnostic tool for managers in the chocolate industry to evaluate their relationship with customers. The findings found here are not intended to be conclusive or limiting, but offer a useful starting point from which further theoretical and empirical research of customer relationship management in the chocolate market can be built.

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