



A renaissance of brand experience: Advancing the concept through a multi-perspective analysis

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ABSTRACT

Brand experience is one of the most promising concepts to emerge in consumer research over the last decade. However, unlike other brand-related concepts, it has often been considered implicitly, not explicitly, in consumption dynamics. This paper aims to advance knowledge of the concept through an extensive literature review, covering studies that mention the phenomenon of brand experience both explicitly and implicitly (i.e., using relationship theory, service-dominant logic and consumer culture theory). We propose a multi-level framework encompassing the psychological, relational, social and cultural dynamic forces that may enhance the understanding of brand experience. In addressing the micro-, macro- and meso-levels of the proposed framework, we set out a research agenda designed to support a renaissance of brand experience in literature.

1. Introduction

Research on brand experience has flourished since the beginning of the 2000s as a natural consequence of the experiential focus of the marketplace (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999) and research on marketing and consumer behaviour (Aggarwal, 2004; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013; 2008). Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) built on previous works on the experiential value of consumption (e.g., Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) and on the emerging approach of experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999) to provide a definition and an empirical operationalization of brand experience, establishing a promising stream of research within the academic debate. They defined brand experience as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments” (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 53). They identified four constituent dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural brand experience. Sensory brand experience is the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile stimulation provided by the brand. Affective brand experience is the emotional stimulation provided. Intellectual brand experience is the cognitive stimulation, and behavioural brand experience is about the actions and behaviours stimulated by the brand. Based on Schmitt's (1999) definition of experience, which contains “sense”, “feel”, “think”, “act” and “relate” dimensions, some scholars have also mentioned an additional social (relational)

dimension (Nysveen, Pedersen, & Skard, 2013; Schmitt, Brakus, & Zarantonello, 2015), which is about “relating to others through the brand” (Schmitt, Brakus, & Zarantonello, 2015, p. 170). Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) argued, and empirically showed, that brand experience is different from other brand-related constructs such as brand attitude, brand involvement, brand attachment and brand personality. They also demonstrated that brand experience is an antecedent of brand personality, a strong predictor of brand loyalty and even a driver of satisfaction, and noted, “if a brand evokes an experience, this alone may lead to satisfaction and loyalty” (p. 63).

Brand experience is increasingly recognised as important in managerial practice. A recent survey by the global meetings and events specialist Freeman (2017) found that 59% of the nearly 1000 Chief Marketing Officers surveyed valued brand experience as a way to create ongoing relationships, and over one-third expected brand experiences to make up 21–50% of their marketing budgets within the next five years. However, academics have failed to show similar enthusiasm for the further development of a definition and operationalization of the brand experience construct. A thorough literature review of papers on “brand experience” found that in almost all cases, research relied on the theoretical perspective of brand experience derived from the work of Schmitt (1999) and Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) without providing any criticism or further theoretical elaboration of the concept. Since 2009, most papers using the construct of brand experience in empirical studies have built on the theoretical premises of positivist epistemology, and provided empirical quantitative tests of causal

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relationships between the antecedents and outcomes of brand experience (Ding & Tseng, 2015; Lin, 2015; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). Only 19% of these papers were published in journals with an impact factor. The development of brand experience has therefore only marginally affected the academic debate, despite the acknowledgment that experience is making revolutionary changes in the contemporary marketplace (Diamond et al., 2009; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

In the decade since the work by Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009), the changes recorded in consumers, markets and consumption contexts (e.g., digitalization of markets, proliferation of consumption contexts, and co-creative relationships between demand and supply) suggest the need for a broader view of brand experience (Schmitt, Brakus, & Zarantonello, 2014). However, a closer and more critical look at the marketing literature on brand experience reveals little progress. This trajectory is sharply different from that drawn by other recently established brand-related constructs suitable for alternative conceptualizations and operationalizations (see Brownlie & Saren, 1995; Moussa, 2015 for similar arguments) such as brand personality (Aaker, 1997; Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Geuens, Weijters, & De Wulf, 2009), brand attachment (Jiménez & Voss, 2014; Lacœuilhe, 2000; Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2008; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005) and brand love (Ahuvia, Batra, & Bagozzi, 2008; Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Bagozzi, Batra, & Ahuvia, 2017; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Zarantonello, Formisano, & Grappi, 2016). The academic interest in these brand-related concepts, reflected in the number of studies (Diamond et al., 2009), demonstrates scholars' commitment to keep abreast of the dynamism of brand meanings and branding practices. The same level of interest cannot be identified in brand experience. To date, there is still only one definition, a single operationalization of the brand experience construct, and a single theoretical perspective through which it is approached.

The established conceptualization of brand experience is rooted in a stimuli–reaction paradigm derived from psychological studies. The way in which it is currently formalized therefore tends to “objectify” the chain of effects between brand stimuli and brand experience (Hatch, 2012). That is implicitly biased towards an overemphasis on the ability of marketers to design and deploy brand stimuli to generate specific brand experiences, and to link these (hopefully positive) brand experiences to desirable outcomes (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Schmitt, 1999).

In this paper, we deductively demonstrated that scholars are becoming increasingly keen to view brands as socially-constructed phenomena created and co-created through interaction between marketplace actors (Arvidsson, 2006; Brodie, 2017; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). Post-structuralist epistemologies rely on the assumption that marketplace phenomena are enabled and constrained by continuous interaction between marketplace actors (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Scholars using these epistemologies, therefore, are particularly unlikely to approach brand experience “à la Brakus et al.,” to avoid the trap of a misalignment between the theoretical grounding of the definition, and the theoretical stance assumed in the empirical work. A close look at the brand literature shows that brand experience is a central topic in many research streams using post-structuralist epistemology, although Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello's (2009) definition is seldom mentioned.

We found three main theoretical streams dealing with brand experience that did not build on Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009). These streams were rooted in (1) relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), (2) consumer culture theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 2015), and (3) service-dominant logic (SDL) (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). We examined how brand experience has been conceptualized in studies that contrasted the reductionist definition of brand experience with the theoretical stance used to examine its issues.

For this paper, we carried out a literature review of empirical works

using the definition of Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) and investigated how brand experience has been approached through relationship theory, SDL and CCT. This enabled us to provide a broader conceptualization of brand experience based on the theoretical approach of each of these streams. Based on this, we put forward a new multi-level and dynamic theoretical framework with three contextual levels of analysis (micro-, meso-, and macro-levels) derived from sociological theory (see Turner, 2010 and Turner & Boyns, 2001 for finer grained analysis of the sociological debate about the micro-, meso- and macro-divide in sociological theory). This is designed to help future researchers understand and examine how brand experience forms and develops at each level. Finally, we proposed a research agenda setting out suitable theories and research methods for the future, which we believe would advance the current understanding of brand experience across each level.

To our knowledge, this is the first paper to move the concept of brand experience forward, providing a theoretical, empirical and practical pluralism through which scholars and practitioners can approach this concept.

2. Brand experience in literature

We started this research by conducting a systematic literature review of articles published in academic journals from the first paper that mentioned “brand experience” in 1991 (Ortmeyer & Huber, 1991) to the end of 2016 (Tafesse, 2016), scanning the key bibliographical databases (Scopus, EBSCO, ABI Proquest Complete, Web of Science). We used “brand experience” as the search string and looked for its presence in the title or abstract. This resulted in 388 papers, of which 74 were mainly focused on “brand experience”.

The main starting point referenced by most of these papers was Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009). Building on Schmitt's (1999) conceptual work, Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) followed a multi-step approach to develop a conceptualization and operationalization of the brand experience construct, using more than 1000 respondents and 70 brands. They derived four brand experience dimensions (sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural) from a literature review and then corroborated them through a qualitative study. In five subsequent quantitative studies, they generated and selected the brand experience scale items (Study 1); reduced the set of items and confirmed the dimensionality of the scale (Studies 2 and 3); further established the reliability and validity of the scale (Studies 4 and 5); and used the brand experience scale to predict key consumer behaviour outcomes (satisfaction and loyalty).

No marketing studies have tried to critically analyse or extend the brand experience concept after the conceptualization of Schmitt (1999) and Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009). Instead, almost all adopted their definition. Brand experience has generally been investigated using a positivist epistemology and quantitative methods (48 out of 74 studies). There were two conceptual works, one literature review, 12 using qualitative methods (mostly interviews) and 11 practitioner-oriented papers.

The papers using a positivist perspective, in particular, aimed to find antecedents and outcomes of brand experience and eventually analysed how firms can leverage sources (brand stimuli) to generate experience (see Appendix A). The positivist ontology (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) means that these papers were generally designed to provide evidence of causality between brand-related stimuli and consumer responses. It is therefore clear that a definition and operationalization of brand experience grounded in positivist ontology cannot adequately enable us to develop a deep understanding of the nature of brand experience when the brand is approached in other ways.

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