

The Dynamic Nature of Brand Experience



Benjamin Österle, Marc M. Kuhn, and Jörg Henseler

Abstract There is a need to conceptually link findings from specific experience areas and to generalize from them to overarching principles of experiences. Building on recent syntheses and conceptualizations, we contribute to this discussion and synthesis by proposing a framework that we think answers questions regarding the role of the brand in the customer journey and the customer experience and the measurement of overall brand experiences.

Regarding the role of the brand in the customer experience and the customer journey, we follow the conceptualization that brands reflect all customer experiences with a brand along the customer journey. Thus, the experiences that brands evoke within the customer (sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual) represent these overall experiences that customers have with a brand along the customer journey. By linking the brand experience concept to two recent frameworks on static and dynamic experiences and the customer journey and experience, we propose that static experiences, i.e., single touchpoints, reflect the brand-related stimuli that compose the overall, i.e., dynamic, brand experience. This conceptualization allows for the measurement of the overall brand experience across multiple touchpoints and multiple stages, which is an important issue for both marketing theory and practice.

Keywords Brand experience · Brand management · Customer experience · Customer journey · Touchpoint

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Introduction

Customer experiences are at the center of both marketing practitioner's and academic's attention, according to a recent study commissioned by Accenture (2015) and the research priorities of the Marketing Science Institute (2016).

This importance of experiences has already been voiced in the 1950s by Abbott (1955) with the quote that “what people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences” (Abbott 1955, p. 39). Independently from these findings, the experiential approach was developed in the 1980s, which focuses on fantasies, feelings, and fun as key aspects of the consumption experience (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). This approach has broadened the then predominant view of customers and consumers as being purely rational and information-processing decision-makers by recognizing the emotional aspects involved. Since then, it has sparked ongoing interest in both marketing practice and academia and even led to the conceptualization of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1998).

Despite this attention already decades ago, the research area on experience in marketing is still nascent and emerging (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Schmitt and Zarantonello 2013). Various streams of research investigated different aspects and facets of the customer experience along the customer journey more in-depth (Kranzbühler et al. 2017; Lemon and Verhoef 2016), such as, product experiences (Hoch 2002), service experiences (Hui and Bateson 1991), shopping experiences (Kerin et al. 1992), brand experiences (Brakus et al. 2009), or the distinction between day-to-day “ordinary” and extraordinary experiences (Carù and Cova 2003), and there is a need to conceptually link those findings from specific experience areas and to generalize from them to overarching principles of experiences (Schmitt and Zarantonello 2013). In recent efforts to achieve these syntheses, and to investigate the reciprocal dependence and influence of customer experiences in different contexts and at different touchpoints on one another and the overall customer experience, academics identified that although it was initially introduced as a holistic concept, customer experience has been investigated at different levels: static experience at various touchpoints, which represents an “individual's cognitive, affective and sensory evaluation of one or multiple touchpoints with a firm at one specific point in time” (Kranzbühler et al. 2017, p. 6) and dynamic experience, “an individual's evolving cognitive, affective and sensory evaluation of a series of any direct or indirect touchpoints with a firm within the entire course of the customer journey” (Kranzbühler et al. 2017, p. 6). This dynamic, overall customer experience is “built up through a collection of these touch points in multiple phases of a customer's decision process or purchase journey” (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, pp. 70–71). Since previous experiences influence the current experience and also future experiences, and current experiences might let us see previous experiences in a different light, the customer experience process is iterative and dynamic (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, pp. 74–76). In sum, customer experience is a broad, multidimensional umbrella construct (Kranzbühler et al. 2017), “focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey” (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, pp. 70–71).

Along with these syntheses arose several questions related to the measurement of the dynamic, overall experience, and the role of the brand within this context (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, p. 87): “What is the role of the brand in the CX [customer experience] and customer journey? [...] How can we measure the CX construct across multiple touch points and journey stages? Are different measures needed for different stages of the journey? [...] What fast, simple metrics could provide insight? [...] What are the effects of different touch points on customer experience, conversion, and loyalty?” Our goal in this article is to bring together the literature that exists on these questions and to propose a framework that we think might answer them. To address this, the remainder of this paper is structured as follows: First, we provide an overview of the customer experience literature, with a focus on its multilevel nature of dynamic and static experiences. Second, we focus on the individual touchpoints and different aspects of experiences and their measurement. Third, we link the concept of brands and brand experience to the multilevel nature of experiences and the individual touchpoints. We then propose our framework as an answer to the above-mentioned questions.

Customer Experiences

Although the experiential approach was introduced by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) and Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), one of these authors describes that, without realizing it when they developed their approach, “a distinguished lineage for the basic concepts involved could be traced back through the work of (say) Sid Levy at Northwestern in the 1960s, Wroe Alderson at Wharton in the 1950s, and the economists Lawrence Abbott in the 1950s or Alfred Marshall in the early 1900s, all the way to Adam Smith in the Eighteenth Century (e.g., Alderson 1957; Boyd and Levy 1963; Woods 1981)” (Holbrook 2006, p. 715). Nevertheless, with their experiential approach they put emphasis on this view, where the customer is not only seen as rational, information-processing decision-maker, but emotions like fantasies, feelings, and fun also play a role in consumption.

As highlighted by Kranzbühler et al. (2017), following the initial works of Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) and Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), researchers investigated the impact of employees, other customers, and environmental variables such as the physical surroundings on the customer’s experience at single touchpoints (Bitner 1990, 1992; Hui and Bateson 1991). Also, in the context of individual touchpoints, sensory marketing recently described the use of subconscious triggers to create a sensory customer experience by appealing to the human senses (Achrol and Kotler 2012; Krishna et al. 2010; Madzharov et al. 2015). In parallel, research emerged extending the concept of customer experience by considering temporal influences. Researchers recognized that experiences can also take place across a longitudinal timeframe and multiple, day-to-day, not necessarily extraordinary service encounters and that past experiences determine current ones (Arnould and Price 1993; Carù and Cova 2003; Verhoef et al. 2009). Service-dominant logic further

validated this temporal influence and dynamic perspective by highlighting that services and the accompanying experiences are at the core of business and the value created is subjective, contextual, and experiential (Vargo and Lusch 2004). This perspective was extended even further by moving away from the focus on dyadic firm-customer interactions as fundament for experiences, when a broader network of firms and interactions between this network and the customer were incorporated into experience research (Patrício et al. 2011). These developments led to the conceptualization of customer experiences on two levels by Kranzbühler et al. (2017): “Static CE is an individual’s cognitive, affective and sensory evaluation of one or multiple touchpoints with a firm at one specific point in time. Dynamic CE, in contrast, is an individual’s evolving cognitive, affective and sensory evaluation of a series of any direct or indirect touchpoints with a firm within the entire course of the customer journey” (Kranzbühler et al. 2017, p. 6). In their framework, static experiences are influenced by the customer experience design, which is under the firm’s control, environmental and personal factors, and perceived through the individual’s sensory, cognitive, and affective lens (Kranzbühler et al. 2017). The dynamic customer experience in turn is formed by static CEs created at various touchpoints with a firm (Kranzbühler et al. 2017). Their proposed framework is depicted in Fig. 1.

A similar point of view is expressed by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). They “conceptualize customer experience as a customer’s ‘journey’ with a firm over time during the purchase cycle across multiple touch points. We also conceptualize the

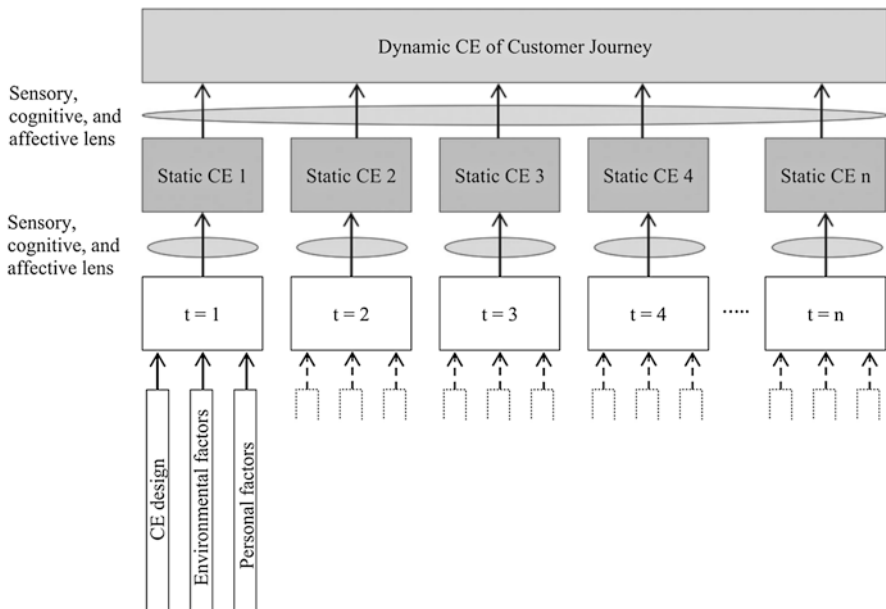


Fig. 1 Formation of static and dynamic customer experience. Reprinted from *The multilevel nature of customer experience research: An integrative review and research Agenda*, by Kranzbühler, A.-M., Kleijnen, M. H., Morgan, R. E., & Teerling, M., 2017, *International Journal of Management Reviews*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12140>

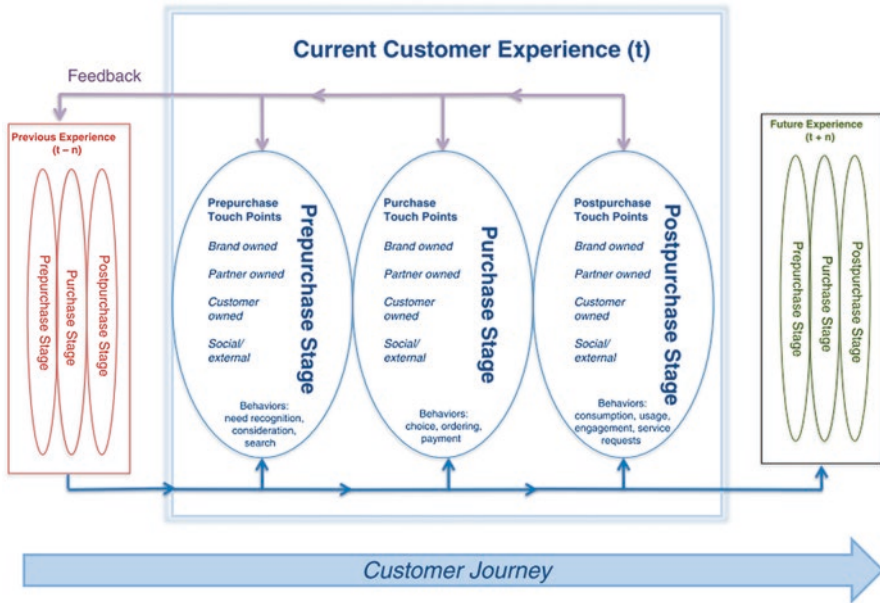


Fig. 2 Process Model for Customer Journey and Experience. Reprinted from *Understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey*, by Lemon, K. N., & Verhoef, P. C., 2016, *Journal of Marketing*, 80(6), 69–96. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.15.0420>

total customer experience as a dynamic process” (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, p. 74). This dynamic and iterative process flows from prepurchase to purchase to postpurchase phases and incorporates past experiences and purchases, as well as external factors. During this process, customers experience touchpoints in each stage, not all of which are under the firm’s control (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Their proposed process model for the customer journey and experience is depicted in Fig. 2. However, due to a lack of a strong measurement for the overall customer experience along the entire customer journey, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) express the urgent need for the development of such a scale or scales. They describe that this field is still in the development and scales on this overall customer experience are “still being evaluated and reviewed for their internal and external validity” (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, p. 81) and that established measures such as SERVQUAL might provide a good starting point (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

Touchpoints and Experiences

The management of customer touchpoints is a key issue in experience management. Customers’ experiences are formed through experiencing, assessing, and evaluating individual touchpoints and entire journeys with a firm or brand through their own

sensorial, emotional, and cognitive lenses (Kranzbühler et al. 2017). A touchpoint is a stimulus that induces a private, individual experience “‘of’ or ‘about’ something” (Schmitt and Zarantonello 2013, p. 50). The sources of what an experience is or is about and what induces these experiences are manifold, and they spread across all stages of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). These experience sources, or touchpoints, range, for example, from direct interaction with a product, as product experience (Hoch 2002); to the consumption of a service, as service experience (Klaus and Maklan 2012); to store visits, as shopping or retail experience, when customers interact with the staff and other customers or experience the atmosphere of a store (Arnould et al. 2002; Verhoef et al. 2009). Additionally, all kinds of communication tools, both traditional above-the-line instruments such as advertising and below-the-line instruments such as public relations or event marketing, are touchpoints and as such sources for individual experiences with a firm at a single point in time in the customer journey (Schmitt et al. 2014). The increasing focus on customer experience arises because of the rising complexity of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). The increased number of a myriad of touchpoints with a firm on that journey on multiple channels, customer-to-customer interactions through social media, the increasingly social nature of these touchpoints in general, results in opportunities and challenges for companies. But, in general, it becomes increasingly complex for firms to create, manage, deliver, and attempt to control customer experiences (Brynjolfsson et al. 2013; Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Libai et al. 2010; Rapp et al. 2015; Verhoef et al. 2015). Four types of touchpoints with different levels of control by the firm have been identified, and, on each stage of the experience, the customer might interact with each of these types (Lemon and Verhoef 2016): brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external/independent touchpoints. Brand-owned touchpoints include those that are designed, managed, and controlled by the brand itself, such as advertising, websites, or brand-controlled elements of the marketing mix. Partner-owned touchpoints are touchpoints in the customer experience that are jointly designed, managed, or controlled by the brand and its partners, such as channel distribution partners, communication channel partners, or marketing agencies. Customer-owned touchpoints are out of the reach of the brand’s control, such as a customer’s thinking about their desires in the prepurchase phase or during the consumption of a product or service in the postpurchase stage. Social/external/independent touchpoints reflect the role of, e.g., other customers, peer influences, environments, or other independent information sources on the customer’s experience (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). All of these touchpoints along the customer journey can be broken down into “experiential stimuli” (Schmitt and Zarantonello 2013, pp. 50–51), more specific stimuli that evoke experiences at that single touchpoint. For example, “typefaces, logos, colors, and shapes appear at experience touchpoints as part of the graphic designs of slogans and messages and as graphic elements on Web sites and in shopping environments” (Schmitt and Zarantonello 2013, pp. 50–51). The complex question remains for experience management, which of these stimuli evoke which experiences at various touchpoints, and how the dimensions or stimuli of individual

touchpoints relate to the dimensions of experiences or evoke experiences (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Schmitt 2009; Schmitt and Zarantonello 2013).

Due to the myriad number of touchpoints and their different natures, one single scale encompassing all touchpoints and their stimuli and dimensions is barely imaginable. Instead, although it is a complex endeavor, we argue for individual experience scales for single touchpoints which evaluate what dimensions or stimuli at this touchpoint evoke or contribute to the experience at that individual touchpoint. These could be scales for all touchpoints, where customers “make” an experience, such as product and user experience scales, retail experience scales, service experience scales, or event marketing experience scales, to just name a few, the recent development of which support our case (Bustamante and Rubio 2017; Hassenzahl et al. 2010; Klaus and Maklan 2012; Tafesse 2016).

Brands and Experiences

Branding literature has evolved in its logic of branding and the meaning of the brand considerably. Since the early 1900s, where brands were seen as identifiers, its evolution moved toward the notion of brands as functional and symbolic images between the 1930s and the 1990s; to the logic of brands as knowledge, relationship partner, and promise; and toward today’s status, where brands and their value are seen within dynamic and social processes (Merz et al. 2009).

Around the time of the evolution toward the service-dominant logic, brands were conceptualized to “reflect the complete experience that customers have with products” (Keller and Lehmann 2006, p. 740). In light of the service-dominant logic, we propose that this reflection of experiences by a brand goes beyond products and includes services and all other touchpoints during the customer journey. This is in line with Brakus et al.’s (2009) conceptualization of the brand experience as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognition) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications and environments” (Brakus et al. 2009, p. 53). While some of the experience constructs mentioned in the previous section refer to specific phases of the customer journey, brand experience is considered to span all phases (Nysveen et al. 2013). According to Brakus et al.’s conceptualization of the brand experience scale, it is not measuring the experience with brands at individual touchpoints. Instead, the brand experience scale evaluates the internal experiences that are evoked by brands as sources of these experiences: “In addition, when consumers complete brand experience scales, such scales are usually not directly assessing the dynamic, “online” experience of the consumer in the here and now; rather, such scales typically assess a lasting trace stored in long-term memory based on multiple exposures to brand-related stimuli” (Brakus et al. 2009, p. 55). Furthermore, “brand experiences arise in a variety of settings when consumers search for, shop for, and consume brands. Accordingly, we conceptualized brand

experience as subjective consumer responses that are evoked by specific brand related experiential attributes in such settings. We demonstrated that brand experience can be broken down into four dimensions (sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral), which are differentially evoked by various brands” (Brakus et al. 2009, p. 65). Therefore, we propose that this internal response to a brand, evoked by brand-related stimuli or touchpoints, reflects the complete, dynamic, overall experience that customers “have” with a brand along the customer journey as proposed by Kranzbühler et al. (2017) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016).

Figure 3 summarizes our proposals in a holistic brand experience framework.

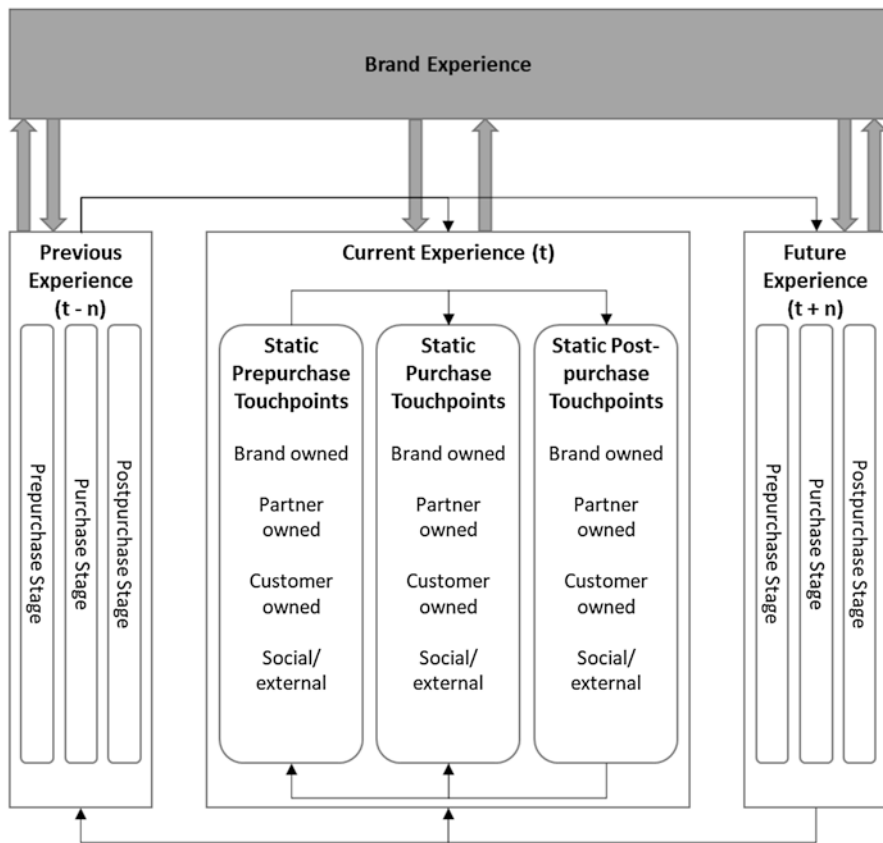


Fig. 3 Customer Journey and Dynamic Nature of Brand Experience. Own representation based on *The multilevel nature of customer experience research: An integrative review and research agenda*, by Kranzbühler, A.-M., Kleijnen, M. H., Morgan, R. E., & Teerling, M., 2017, *International Journal of Management Reviews*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12140> and *Understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey*, by Lemon, K. N., & Verhoef, P. C., 2016, *Journal of Marketing*, 80(6), 69–96. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.15.0420>

Conclusion and Implications

There is a need to conceptually link findings from specific experience areas and to generalize from them to overarching principles of experiences (Schmitt and Zarantonello 2013). Building on recent syntheses and conceptualizations (Kranzbühler et al. 2017; Lemon and Verhoef 2016), we contribute to this discussion and synthesis by proposing a framework that we think answers questions that have been put forward within that discussion.

Regarding the role of the brand in the customer experience and the customer journey, we follow the conceptualization that brands reflect all customer experience with a brand along the customer journey (Keller and Lehmann 2006). Thus, the experiences that brands evoke within the customer (sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual) represent these overall experiences that customers have with a brand along the customer journey (Brakus et al. 2009). This conceptualization allows for the measurement of the overall brand experience across multiple touchpoints and multiple stages and thus answers another question put forward by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). By linking the brand experience concept to the framework of static and dynamic experiences proposed by Kranzbühler et al. (2017), we propose that static experiences, i.e., single touchpoints, reflect the brand-related stimuli that compose the overall, i.e., dynamic, brand experience.

With respect to future research, we suggest the empirical validation of our framework. Additionally, due to the vast amount and increasingly different nature of these individual touchpoints (e.g., product experiences vs. social media experiences related to a brand), separate measurement scales will be needed, at least for groups of similar touchpoints. Experimental and quasi-experimental research designs then allow for the investigation of the effects of different touchpoints and their experiential stimuli on the overall brand experience and its dimensions, by measuring it before and after exposure to a touchpoint.

Since the brand experience scale does not reflect the experiences at a single point in time, longitudinal studies also allow for the investigation of the effects of multiple touchpoints on each other and on brand experience along the entire customer journey. Since the brand experience scale only measures strength and not valence of the experiences, for theoretical and managerial purposes, it might be necessary to slightly reword the individual items, in order to evaluate whether the overall experience is influenced positively or negatively by various touchpoints (Brakus et al. 2009).

We have brought together two similar but still different frameworks of the customer experience along the customer journey (Kranzbühler et al. 2017; Lemon and Verhoef 2016) by integrating the brand and brand experiences as the conceptual link between both. We think that our contribution to the theoretical discussion on the synthesis of the experience literature will also be valuable for marketing practice, by providing a framework that allows for the measuring and evaluation of the influence of individual touchpoints on the overall experience with the brand.

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