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Interactive brand experience pathways to customer-brand engagement and value co-creation

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to address a question posed by Ruth Bolton (2011): “What kinds of interactive experiences lead to favourable customer engagement rates”?

Design/methodology/approach – Building on the literature, the paper develops different interactive experience pathways for both functional and hedonic brands.

Findings – The different pathways are developed formally for both brand types. Different facets of brand experience and different facets of interactivity are entailed for each brand type. The models are illustrated with actual brands.

Research limitations/implications – The study is primarily conceptual and requires empirical testing. The purpose of the paper is to motivate academics to explore the nature of interactive experiences in whatever way they choose.

Practical implications – The different interactive experience pathways between functional and hedonic brands imply different engagement and co-creation strategies by firms. Generally, a richer set of engagement options are relevant to the hedonic brand. However, using the Domino’s Pizza example, the paper suggests that functional brands can extend their repertoire of engagement tools by borrowing inspiration from the hedonic brands.

Social implications – There is a major social or community aspect to interactive experiences. Moreover, some of the brands used as examples in the paper, such as Patagonia, have major social or environmental impacts.

Originality/value – This original research pioneers the discovery and coding of the nature of interactive brand experiences. Hitherto, the domain can be construed as the idiomatic, “elephant in the room”, an important topic but not discussed. The conversation has now begun.

Keywords Interactivity, Brand experience, Interactive experiences, Pathways to engagement

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Customer-brand engagement and customer value co-creation are two growth areas of academic marketing research in the past decade. Customer value co-creation is particularly dominant (Payne *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Hoyer *et al.*, 2010; France *et al.*, 2015; Ranjan and Read, 2016). However, brand engagement research is growing rapidly as well (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Dwivedi, 2015; Dessart *et al.*, 2015; France *et al.*, 2016). Both streams of research are associated with a fundamental paradigm shift in marketing, from *customer-centric* marketing (where customer needs strongly influence marketing) to *customers-driving* marketing (where customers have taken over the steering wheel of marketing). User-generated content typifies the newly emerging paradigm, but there are many facets including a strong customer voice in customer social

media revolts and more active participation in new product development.

Much of the current engagement and co-creation literature focuses on the nature of relevant concepts and their consequences. The leading articles paint a useful framework of the roles of key concepts operating in a broader service ecosystem (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2011; Grönroos and Voima, 2013). Each seminal paper highlights the role of interactive experiences. Brodie *et al.* (2011) argue that customer engagement arises by virtue of interactive experiences; Vargo and Lusch (2011) provide a broader perspective of the role of experiences-facilitated co-creation, and Grönroos and Voima (2013) argue that value creation is the customer’s creation of value-in-use during usage where value is socially constructed through experiences.

The commonality of interactive experiences as a building block across these three seminal papers is noteworthy. Understandably, interactive experiences are a given in these models. However, the time is ripe to dig deeper and explore the interactive brand experience that precedes customer-brand engagement and customer value co-creation. Two papers provide special inspiration:

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Engagement is the outcome of repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand (Mollen and Wilson, 2010, p. 919).

What kinds of interactive experiences lead to favourable customer engagement rates? (Bolton, 2011, p. 273)

Mollen and Wilson (2010) emphasize the important role of experiences as instrumental in engagement. Similarly, in a subsequent paper, Malthouse and Calder (2011, p. 277) reinforce that engagement is based on experiences and that at some level, all experiences are interactive and co-creative, but this aspect should not imply that engagement requires active behaviour. The question posed by Bolton (2011) represents the challenge for the current paper and the entire discipline. Asking what the relevant interactive experiences are is a type of black box that demands exploration and explanation. It is almost like the elephant in the room; everyone knows that interactive experiences are important to engagement and co-creation but no-one wants to talk about them. Well, the current paper says that it is now time to raise the conversation.

The paper addresses this question by first exploring five literatures:

- 1 broad-based experience-focused papers;
- 2 some narrower experiential-focused papers;
- 3 the brand experience literature;
- 4 the interactivity; and
- 5 the engagement platform literature.

Next, the brand experience and interactivity literatures are integrated in a way that particular pathways can be conceptualized between the interactive brand experiences and the outcomes of customer engagement and co-creation. Hedonic brands are contrasted to functional brands. The new schema is illustrated with some simple case examples.

The literature

Five literatures are utilized: broad-based experiences; narrow-based experiences; brand experience; interactivity; and engagement platforms.

Broad-based experience literature

Although the broad-based experience literature is vast, especially in the service-dominant logic domain, we choose three approaches here to represent selectively such a domain. Specifically, we highlight the papers of Helkkula *et al.* (2012) and Jaakkola *et al.* (2015).

Helkkula *et al.* (2012) focus on value as an experience as an interesting development of intersecting the value and experience literatures. Qualitative interviews of event storytellers enable the development of critical propositions, including that value in the experience can be construed individually and socially and can be lived or imaginary. Past experience is relevant and context is important. In common with elements of previous research, value in the experience goes beyond the interaction between the customer and the service-provider is broadened to cover the customer's lifeworld contexts and social networks and includes both existing and imaginary customer practices. Chen *et al.* (2012) address similar issues. They define experience sharing as creation effort for the benefit of others and value in experience as an effort-based meaning of value creation.

Jaakkola *et al.* (2015) develop an integrative conceptualization of the broad domain of service experience co-creation. The 12 dimension integrative framework is compelling and subsumes most previous literature models, for example, Helkkula *et al.* (2012).

By its nature, the Jaakkola *et al.* (2015) integrative framework is very broad. It guides the framing of future more specific research endeavours rather than providing by itself very nuanced propositions. A similar point could be made of the other broad-based experience seminal papers. Helkkula *et al.* (2012) in particular highlights the potential role of customer experience at a meta-level but more focused applications are required to test what works in practice.

Narrow-based experience literature

Again, now at a narrower level, there is a vast literature that addresses more narrow-based experience phenomena. Selectively, we note the contributions from Schembri (2009); Minkiewicz *et al.* (2014); Klaus and Maklan (2012) and Foster and McLelland (2015).

Schembri (2009) provides an interesting case study of an experiential brand – Harley-Davidson. The study highlights the important role of the consumer in constructing both the brand experience and the brand meaning. She demonstrates that consumption is a socializing tool and the brand is a symbol of that socialization. Schembri (2009) brings together the themes of consumption as play, communal sharing and socializing as identity forming.

Minkiewicz *et al.* (2014) use qualitative museum experiences to start to tease out some of the more specific factors that enable consumers to co-create their experience. Although very exploratory, their study shows that engagement and co-production are conditioned by previous related experience, the experience space design and interactions with other users, among other influences. Their study is surprisingly one of the few to tease out more concrete and nuanced influences of the co-creation of consumer experiences.

Moving in part from the consumer to the firm perspective in experience control, the study by Foster and McLelland (2015) is interesting. Their study considers the role of branded experiential themes in a retailing context, for example, Hard Rock Café (themed) versus Applebee's (non-themed). The study is able to package the shopping experience alternative as multi-sensory, interactive and holistic and finds that this increases shopping enjoyment.

Finally, in this section and at a different pole to the other authors, we can note the attempt of one study to measure service experience. There seem to be few such attempts, so the contribution of Klaus and Maklan (2012) is noteworthy. Their study seems to be the first empirically founded conceptualization and measurement of the service/customer experience. Ideally, that article can stimulate more research into understanding the service experience from a customer perspective.

Brand experience literature

The two leading approaches on brand experience are Pine and Gilmore (1999) and Brakus *et al.* (2009). The Brakus *et al.* (2009) approach to brand experience seems the most analytical and is the one we adopt here. They derive four dimensions of brand experience:

- 1 sensory (as in multisensory);
- 2 emotional (passion);
- 3 intellectual (cognitive); and
- 4 physical (action).

Brakus *et al.* (2009) illustrate their dimensions with well-known brands that typify a dominant dimension, including *Victoria's Secret* as Sensory; *Disney* as Emotional; *LEGO* as intellectual; and *Puma* as Action. Generally, the Brakus *et al.* (2009) scales are well-received, though there are always limitations. For example, Merrilees and Miller (2010) argue that the core branding experience activities is absent from the Brakus *et al.* (2009) approach.

Interactivity literature

Several papers on interactivity canvass possible classifications of interactivity (Ha and James, 1998; Ghose and Dou, 1998; Cho and Cheon, 2005; Voorveld *et al.*, 2010). The most useful and comprehensive seems to be Ghose and Dou (1998). I have re-ordered his classification to start with search and proceed in a pre-, current and post-purchase order, though not all consumers necessarily track that way and some of the processes can be concurrent (for example, online searching for information could combine with multi-media video interaction).

- choice help (search processes);
- online deals;
- online ordering;
- customer support;
- multi-media, e.g. videos (this could be pre-, current or post-purchase);
- entertainment, e.g. games (again, could be pre-, current or post-purchase);
- market research (usually feedback would be sought after purchase); and
- online communities (could be pre-, current or post-purchase).

Interactivity seems a powerful ally in building brand attachment. In its basic form, interactivity can be enhanced through speed and personalized messaging (Song and Zinkhan, 2008). As an entry level effect, interactivity can improve a customer's comprehension or understanding of the brand (Marcias, 2003). If managed correctly, such initial brand comprehensions can be taken a step higher so that the interactivity creates a more favourable impression of the brand (Sicilia *et al.*, 2005; Merrilees and Fry, 2002). Taken a further step, the interactivity can be used to build an effective online relationship (Merrilees, 2002; Ou *et al.*, 2014). An effective online relationship in turn can create e-trust of the brand (Merrilees and Fry, 2003).

Engagement platforms

The current emerging literature on customer co-creation and the increasing centrality of the consumer in driving value makes sense but clearly has the potential to go to an extreme. Without an initial brand offering in the first place, there is no scope for a dominant consumer role. Branding will always require the collaborative efforts of both the firm and the consumer. Thus, although research explaining and understanding consumer interaction with the brand and C2C

interaction is vital, the nature of the firm's brand management system needs to be factored in. One way of doing this is the notion of engagement platforms.

Academic literature on engagement platforms is scarce. Papers by Dholakia *et al.* (2009); Baron and Warnaby (2011) and Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) are among the early academic contributors making the concept of an engagement platform more explicit. All of these papers emphasize the role of interactivity. France *et al.* (2016) in a similar vein postulate and test the combined roles of interactivity and brand quality as essential building blocks of a sound brand engagement platform. Perhaps the most comprehensive approach is Breidbach *et al.* (2014), though their approach emphasizes the technology side of the interactive processes.

A conceptual framework integrating interactivity and brand experience with engagement and co-creation outcomes

The interactive experience pathways are likely to differ between functional brand and hedonic brands. From consumer-behaviour research findings, functional brands are likely to be simpler, information-dominant, less experiential activities. In building the new schema, we argue that two of the Brakus *et al.* (2009) experiential dimensions – cognition and action – are likely to be most important for functional brands, whereas the other two experiential dimensions – sensory and emotion – are more important for hedonic brands.

For example, in ordering pizzas or flight tickets, *cognitive* processes are critical in terms of menu or flight choices, whereas efficient time considerations dominate the *action* processes. *Cognition* and *action* are the dominant experiential dimensions for functional brands.

Alternatively, when examining fashion or cosmetic options, *emotional* involvement is paramount, whereas *sensory* stimulation reinforces the emotional involvement and acts as a tool to (enjoyably) assess the options. *Emotion* and *sensory* are the dominant experiential dimensions for hedonic brands.

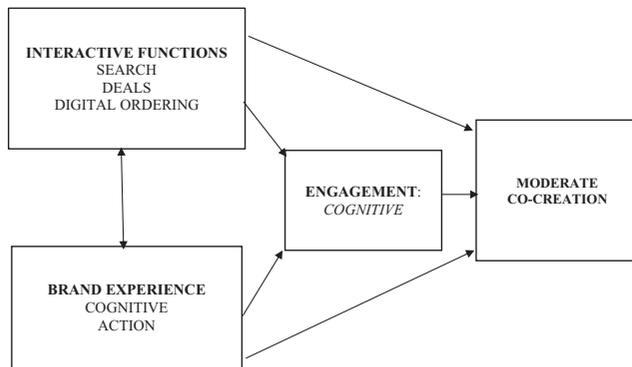
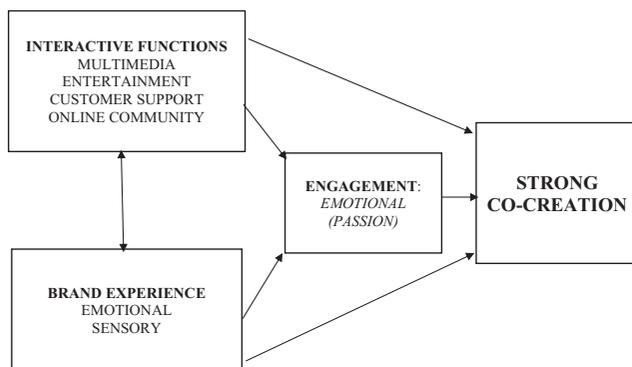
In terms of interactivity functions, for something like pizza ordering, the dominant interactivity functions are *choice help* (search), *online deals* and *digital ordering*. The same would apply to airline flight purchasing. For functional brands in general, it is likely that three aforementioned interactivity dimensions will dominate.

In terms of interactivity functions for fashion or cosmetic purchasing, the dominant interactivity functions are *multi-media*, *entertainment*, *customer support* (especially during the search interaction) and *online communities*. For hedonic brands in general, it is likely that the four aforementioned interactivity dimensions will dominate.

Closer inspection of these patterns reveals a synergy or crossover between the brand experience dimensions and the interactivity dimensions. For functional brands, as Figure 1 shows, the two brand experience dimensions combine with the three interactivity dimensions.

The three interactivity dimensions, including rapid searching, quick response to any deals and speedy ordering all reflect cognition and action.

In contrast, consider hedonic brands. Here the two different brand experience dimensions combine with the four

Figure 1 Interactive experience pathways for functional brands**Figure 2** Interactive experience pathways for hedonic brands

interactivity dimensions, shown in Figure 2. All four nominated interactivity dimensions – multi-media, entertainment, customer support and brand communities – build passion, whereas multi-media and entertainment build a multi-sensory experience. The multi-sensory tools facilitate the emotional build-up.

To summarise, the relevant brand experience dimensions fuse with the relevant interactivity dimensions, with a contrasting pattern between functional brands and hedonic brands.

In terms of engagement outcomes, shown in Figure 1, the combination of interactivity and brand experience in the case of functional brands leads primarily towards a cognitive form of customer-brand engagement as defined in Hollebeek *et al.* (2014). In contrast, in the case of hedonic brands, shown in Figure 2, the combination of relevant interactivity and brand experience leads primarily towards an emotional (passionate) form of customer-brand engagement (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014).

Moving from customer-brand engagement to co-creation, our initial schema suggests that functional brand users are more likely to respond to rational rewards if they to participate in competitions, whereas hedonic brand users will have more intrinsic motives to give feedback and participate with the brands they love. Companies will need extra interactive tools to facilitate the co-creation contributions. To an extent, these extra interactive tools may not be too dissimilar across functional and hedonic brands. Hedonic brands are likely to use multi-sensory, interesting and creative interactions because that is normal, whereas functional brands may need to do the same because they need to lift their engagement

platform performance to get more co-creation participation from an otherwise less involved user. Outside of special competitions, it seems likely that hedonic brand users are likely to be more active in peer-to-peer co-creation (Figure 2) because they are more passionate about the brand. In contrast, functional brand users are less likely to do so (Figure 1), except maybe in a few special cases, such as sharing newly announced price deals.

Illustrating the new conceptual schema

Starting with hedonic brands, consider the cases of Patagonia clothing and Sephora cosmetics. Both companies build a powerful sensory and emotional experience setting for their customers. Both use customer support and multi-media interactivity. Customer support in these cases is not the old-fashioned post-purchase process of dealing with product failures. Rather customer support is part of the ongoing experience with the brand, with various types of enhancements by the firm. For example, both firms include product reviews as part of the interactive experience. Thus, potential consumers can draw upon product reviews to get other ideas and opinions about what to do, all of this during the experiential process. Apart from product reviews, users can watch videos (multi-media interaction) to assist their choices. Some of the videos border on entertainment. For example, Sephora includes videos on makeup lessons and advice, whereas Patagonia has videos supporting environmental alliances.

In part, the two hedonic brands help build passionate, engaged consumers, who have a propensity to initiate their own brand-supportive co-creation. Additionally, sometimes the co-creation is seamlessly immersed into the experience. For example, Patagonia facilitates co-creation participation through online recycling campaigns and through social support via various lifestyle brand communities.

In contrast, functional brand users, such as air ticket purchasers, are usually constrained to a less interesting and exciting experience. It can be a battle to navigate the route choices before the airlines fill up or a special deal runs out. Airlines invest little in making this activity an enjoyable experience. In small and maybe limited ways, users can inject their own stamp on the activity. For example, airline users can concurrently tap into their own interactive searches by such things as Seatguru.com, enabling some more (cognitive) information on seat layouts to make the flight more comfortable. The Seatguru.com example suggests the potential of airlines to make the airline ticket purchasing process a more enjoyable interactive experience, by facilitating such an application automatically. Maybe one airline could take on such an initiative rather than the usual practice of price gouging through credit card surcharges when customers are actually saving the airline offline booking costs!

Some functional brands are taking initiatives to make the interactive experience more interesting. In Australia at least, Domino's Pizza is making changes to pizza purchasing. In accord with our general interactive experience schema, Domino's Pizza as a functional brand emphasizes the three interactive dimensions of making choices available, deals and speedy ordering. Digital branding has been used to take this trilogy to a new level. Over 70 per cent of their purchases are

by mobile phone. Deals become online deals; ordering becomes digital ordering and choices are readily displayed as well. Digital transformation has greatly speeded the process, with customers offered different prices depending on how quick they want the pizza. Essentially a fairly boring or neutral experience has been transformed into a more interesting digital experience, using more customer-oriented routines as an efficiency facilitator. Recently Domino's Pizza have added a co-creation activity ("create your own pizza menu") with opportunities to make money or donate to charities; a GPS driver tracker; and an interactive Annual Report application. All such developments are intended to fit into the lives of customers and shareholders.

Other functional brands are also transforming their interactive experiences. For example, Coles online, an online supermarket service in Australia has borrowed some of the facets of the hedonic brand interactive experience model. Rather than a simple, perfunctory online ordering service, similar to the airline situation above, Coles adds extra experiential features. For example, multi-media interactivity is added in terms of industry trends; similarly, entertainment interactivity is added in terms of cooking demonstrations and customer-recognition via recall of previously ordered items adds a customization element.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the conceptual schema presented here enables an initial contrast between hedonic and functional brands in terms of combining a different pattern of brand experience and interactivity, leading to different patterns of engagement and co-creation. Predictably, the resulting interactive experience for functional brands is fairly subdued compared to a more emotional and sensory experience for hedonic brands. Examples in the airlines and pizza industries and the fashion clothing and cosmetic industries confirm this contrasting pattern of interactive experiences. Other companies might take the schema as a baseline benchmark to evaluate their own interactive brand experience situation.

Notwithstanding, using the examples of Domino's Pizza and Coles online supermarkets, there is always potential for functional brands to get on board the digital brand transformation bandwagon. Essentially, this brand strategy shift entails either perfecting the functional activities in an easy, efficient and interesting way (e.g. Domino's Pizza) or by the functional brand imitating the interactive experience properties of hedonic brands (e.g. Coles online supermarkets).

Both the initial conceptual schema of interactive experiences and the extension to allow for digital transformation enable us to begin the journey invited by Ruth Bolton's question, namely:

What kinds of interactive experiences lead to favourable customer engagement rates?

We suggest that different answers apply depending on whether the focal brand is hedonic or functional. We argue that the two types of brand entail *different facets* of brand experience and *different facets* of interactivity. Consequently, the result is different types of customer-brand engagement and also different levels of co-creation. We have used two inspirational examples of hedonic brands, Patagonia and Sephora to illustrate the possibilities for best practice interactive experiences. Equally, we have added two

inspirational examples of interactive experiences for functional brands to illustrate the potential of digital transformation.

In all cases, we have embraced the "elephant in the room" and scholastically entered the world of interactive experiences in the context of engagement and co-creation. Ideally, other academics will explore this world as well because it is a good way of linking the academic and practitioner domains and also for really understanding how the brand and the consumer morph.

Branding is evolving to a new era where the basis of the brand is the design of a unique interactive brand experience. Both the academic and practical worlds are moving to a situation where the new brand mantra is the ability and capability of companies being able to design and deliver on-brand experiences in a co-creation partnership with consumers.

Postscript: adding omni-channel as a third dimension

The two dimensions of brand experience and interactivity by their nature capture the essence of an interactive experience. Notwithstanding, the conceptual schema of Figures 1 and 2 could be extended by adding a third dimension, omni-channel. That is, the nature, tone and pulse of an interactive experience could be further enhanced by the option of multiple channels, for example, access options of offline, online or mobile. Omni-channel would apply when the access points are relatively seamless from a customer experience perspective (Cook, 2014).

Kushwaha and Shankar (2013) focus on reinforcing the main strengths of the dominant channel to improve the customer experience and to simultaneously enhance brand loyalty. For example, they argue that specialty retailers of low risk functional products such as Office Depot could help traditional channel customers routinize their shopping and purchase more efficiently and repeatedly. As a further example, Kushwaha and Shankar (2013) argue that specialty retailers of high risk functional goods, such as camera stores, could make their websites "sticky" through features such as single-click ordering, product reviews and new item recommendations. Thus, our current two dimensional models could be extended by the type of channel. Additionally, Kushwaha and Shankar (2013) divide functional brands into low risk and high risk. More work is necessary to formally extend the model with the third dimension of channel choice.

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