

A marketing conundrum: resolving the contradictions and primacy claims between the brand experience or customer experience literature and marketing scholars

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1. Introduction

For a decade or more marketing scholars have turned their attention to the research question: what constitutes an experience in consumer and market terms? In other words, given an organisations multiple sets of activity organised around persuading and influencing customers and consumers, how is this activity experienced by individuals, both collectively and individually, how can this form of experience be measured and what influence do specific individual experiences and their cumulative overall experience have on important marketing outcomes such as consumer satisfaction and loyalty?

Fundamentally two streams of academic enquiry emerged. One focussing on brand experience (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2009), the other on customer experience (Klaus and Maklan, 2012). This conceptual paper a) compares and contrasts the development of both streams of literature, b) deduces that after a decade of academic enquiry each stream contradicts and competes with each other and c) proposes a research project to investigate and reconcile the fundamental differences between the brand experience and customer experience streams of academic enquiry.

It does so by assessing experiences in society, the development of the brand experience literature, development of the customer experience literature, the contradictory nature of both and proposing a research project to reconcile these differences.

If organisations are to effectively emerge from COVID practicing marketer need to fundamentally understand the difference between brand experience and customer experience, how each can be effectively managed and how both influence important key marketing outcomes for their organisation.

2. Experiences in society

The Oxford Dictionary's definition of an experience refers to "*an event or occurrence that leaves an impression on someone*". From as early as the 1920's philosophical enquiry challenged the knowledge based view of experience by considering experiences to extend past the knowledge held by an individual and contesting that experience also includes perceiving, feeling and doing (Dewey, 1925).

In relatively recent times Dube and LeBel (2003) extend this thinking to include classifying experiences in the form of the pleasure individual's feel from an experience. Taking experiences in the direction of cognitive psychology i.e. for an individual, experiences are the result of individuals cognising the experience, not just experiencing the experience. Based upon the work of Pinker (1997) this proposes individuals are subject to a system of computational cognitive processes that are triggered by events and cues in the environment. Whereby, individuals sense, feel, reason and relate to what occurs in their surrounding environment. Cognitive psychology forms the principal foundation for the framing of experiences in the marketing literature.

3. Brand experience

As part of their daily lives consumers encounter brands in the form of '*a name, term, sign, symbol. Or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competitors*' (Aaker, 1991). Based upon cognitive psychology, Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) such encounters, termed brand experiences, influence the senses of individual (sensory experience), individuals emotions (affective experience), individuals thoughts (intellectual experience) and the actions of individuals (behavioural experience).

This set of 4 brand experience scales is shown to influence a significant number of other consumer marketing phenomena, recently including, for example, a strong influence on customer inspiration (Kwon & Boger, 2021) and customer loyalty (Ong, Lee & Ramayah, 2018).

However, recently, Zha, Melewar, Foroudi, and Jin (2020) revisited brand experience by undertaking a bibliometric examination of the brand experience literature covering 136 articles published between 2002 and 2018, resulting in a database of 2698 citations. In examining a combination of high citation and co-citation metrics the study re-frames brand experience into four dimensions, three of which diverge from the work of Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009). Namely, customer experience, on-line brand experience and the consumer brand relationship. Retaining sensory brand experience as the fourth dimension. This systematic review of the literature definitively proposes customer experience is a sub-set and component of brand experience.

4. Customer experience

In contrast Meyer (2007) defines customer experience as '*the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company*'. Extended further in their paper titled '*understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey*', Verhoef et al (2009) further develop customer experience recognising it is different at different stages of the customer journey. In each stage of the customer journey the model stipulates the organisations brand and its product and service brands own specific touch points (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Measurement of customer experience is yet again grounded in cognitive psychology again focussing on the sensory, affective and behavioural aspects of cognition (Pareigis, Echeverri and Edvardson, 2012), is applied at differing stages of the customer journey and, as with brand experience, strongly and significantly influences

consumer word-of-mouth, loyalty intentions and customer satisfaction (Klaus and Maklan, 2012). Again a recent and fundamental review of this formative work extends the measurement scales for customer experience to include brand experience (Kuppelweiser and Klaus, 2021). Klaus (2020) emphatically proposes that customer experience has primacy over an organisation brands and their influence on the consumer and that brand experience is a component and sub-set of customer experience.

5. Researching and resolving the brand experience and customer experience conundrum

In summary the current position in the marketing literature is brand experience scholars consider customer experience to be a component and sub-set of brand experience, where as customer experience scholars propose the opposite i.e. brand experience is a sub-set and component of customer experience. It is evident that both streams of research emerge from the cognitive psychology literature and not an empirical study on how customers and consumers experience marketing.

The unravelling of this conundrum is a priority for both marketing academics and practitioners. The following research project is proposed to address this urgent need:

- A. Systematically investigate the ‘experience’ literature of adjacent academic disciplines (i.e. sociology, anthropology, social psychology, medicine and so on) to identify differing ways of defining and the framing experiences for potential application in the domain of marketing.
- B. Empirically (qualitatively) investigate the marketing experiences of individual consumers, to broadly categorise them and to establish against which objects individuals attribute them.
- C. Synthesise the results of the systematic literature review and the qualitative research study to define, delineate and arrive at the key components of brand experience and customer experience.
- D. Establish the boundary conditions for customer experience and brand experience, model the potential relationship between the two constructs and establish potential changes to the quantitative measurement of both constructs.

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