

BRAND EXPERIENCE AND BRAND LOYALTY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Ruchika Ramakrishnan¹ and Anupama Vohra²

In today's competitive era, where consumers have a greater number of choices than ever before, more complex choices, and more channels through which to pursue them, the companies are frantically searching for ways to ensure brand loyalty. In such a scenario, delivering unique brand experiences might be a potential differentiation tool as research indicates ensuring meaningful experiences with the brands will win the allegiance of the time-pressed consumer. Additionally, research has confirmed that a firm has no choice as to whether or not to be connected to experiences created by their brands. Though it has been acknowledged, over the years, by marketing academics and practitioners that consumers look for brands that provide them with unique and memorable experiences yet, the term "brand experience" has started getting attention recently in the marketing literature. Thus, this paper presents a detailed discussion about this contemporary concept of brand experience and its relationship with brand loyalty.

Key words: Brand Experience, Brand Loyalty, Brand Experience Scale, Customer Experience, Service Experience.

INTRODUCTION

"Brands today are defined by the experience they create for customers" (Duffy, 2003).

Marketing has traditionally focussed on physical aspects of product and service brands, such as functionality, price, availability or quality neglecting the experiences provided by these brands. However, fortunately or unfortunately, any interaction with a brand is considered as an experience by consumers. Research has confirmed that modern consumers no longer simply buy products and services; instead they buy the wonderful and emotional experiences around what is being sold (Morrison and Crane, 2007). As observed by Schmitt (2011), "Marketing practitioners have come to realize that understanding how consumers experience brands and, in turn, how to provide appealing brand experiences for them, is critical for differentiating their offerings and ensuring

¹ Assistant Professor, Shyam Lal College, University of Delhi, Delhi. ruchikaram75@gmail.com

² Associate Professor, Faculty of Management Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi. anupamavohra@fms.edu

loyalty in a competitive marketplace”.

Thus, in today's competitive era, where companies are frantically searching for ways to ensure brand loyalty, delivering unique brand experiences might be a potential differentiation tool. In fact, Pullman and Gross (2004) reported, “Evidence suggests that properly executed brand experiences will encourage loyalty by creating emotional connections through an engaging, compelling and consistent context”. Pine and Gilmore (1998) were among the only few who highlighted the importance of “experience” and attributed a separate economic identity to it. They observed, “Economists have typically lumped experiences in with services, but experiences are a distinct economic offering, as different from services as services are from goods”. They argued that as goods and services become commoditized, the “customer experiences” that companies create will matter the most and businesses will be forced to rethink the nature of their products and shift to selling “experiences” rather than products or services.

Hulten (2011) proposed that all communication, consumption experiences, and customer contacts inevitably create an experience in the customer's mind. In fact, many marketing scholars (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Iglesias, Singh and Batista-Foguet, 2011; Payne, Storbacka, Frow and Knox, 2009) have placed experiences at the heart of the brand building process and agree that experience has become a key element in understanding consumer behaviour, and, above all, a foundation for the economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) and marketing (Schmitt, 1999) of the future.

EVOLUTION OF BRAND EXPERIENCE: A CRITICAL REVIEW

Although contemporary academic work emphasises Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) work as the starting point in considering experiential marketing, Frow and Payne (2007) reported that it has origins in much earlier academic work. In fact, Holbrook (2006) clearly points out the fact that much before Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) research, various scholars had already emphasised how the services performed provide consumption experiences and the importance of these consumption experiences.

Nevertheless, the majority of the marketing scholars agree that the notion of experience entered the field of consumption and marketing with Holbrook and Hirschman's pioneering article of 1982. They strongly proposed, “By focusing single mindedly on the consumer as information processor, recent consumer research has tended to neglect the equally important experiential aspects of consumption, thereby limiting our

understanding of consumer behaviour". They developed a useful model contrasting the differences between the information-processing (rational) and the experiential view (irrational). They argued that one cannot reduce the explanation of human behaviour to any narrowly circumscribed and simplistic model as the behaviour of people in general and of consumers in particular is the fascinating and endlessly complex result of a multifaceted interaction between organism and environment. They were of the view that in the experiential paradigm, consumer behaviour pursues the more subjective, emotional, and symbolic aspects of consumption. Thus, according to them, for researchers of consumer behaviour, "an experience is above all a personal occurrence, often with important emotional significance, founded on the interaction with stimuli which are the products or services consumed". In fact, the practically oriented management literature in the late 1990s and 2000s largely followed Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) view.

In one of the earliest works, Alba and Hutchinson (1987) made an attempt to comprehensively review pertinent empirical results available in the psychological literature to provide a useful foundation for research on consumer knowledge. As a result of this review, they stated that product-related experiences include advertising exposures, interactions with salespersons, choice and decision making, purchasing and product usage in various situations. Further, their study revealed that consumers brand experience refers to their knowledge of and familiarity with a brand or brand category.

Carbone and Haeckel (1994), in their conceptual article, published in *Marketing Management*, with a central theme on how to engineer customer experiences defined experience as, "An experience is the take-away impression formed by people's encounters with products, services and businesses – a perception produced when humans consolidate sensory information. In other words, it is the aggregate and cumulative customer perception created during the process of learning about, acquiring, using, maintaining, and (sometimes) disposing of a product or service". They coined a term "experience engineering" and suggested a systematic approach to creating, implementing and measuring the impact of experience clues. They propose that if systematically crafted into a positive impression, the clues promote customer preference, which a company can leverage to differentiate otherwise commodity-like products and services.

Pine and Gilmore (1998), in their widely recognised conceptual article on 'experience economy', published in *Harvard Business Review* (HBR), proposed in the twenty-first century, many developed societies were entering the experience economy following the service economy, where the highest-value economic offerings are experiences. In their

words, “An experience is not an amorphous construct; it is as real an offering as any service, good, or commodity”. According to them, “an experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event. Further, companies stage an experience whenever they engage customers, in a personal, memorable way”. They suggested five principles to design memorable experiences where they included the suggestions already given by Carbone and Haeckel (1994). Unfortunately, they provide no numbers on the size of the experience economy or empirical substantiation for the claim that economies are now entering a new stage of economic offerings.

Further, Caru and Cova (2003), considered experience as a key element in understanding consumer behaviour, in their conceptual article, where they suggested that (a) experiences must be given a broader significance in experiential marketing rather than just restricting it to consumption experience and (b) experiences should be studied beyond an ideological view that tends to consider every experience as extraordinary. They defined experience as, “a subjective episode in the construction/ transformation of the individual, with, however, an emphasis on the emotions and senses lived during the immersion at the expense of the cognitive dimension”. Additionally, Vézina as cited in Caru and Cova (2003) observed, in the experiential perspective, the consumption experience “is no longer limited to some pre-purchase activity (the stimulation of a need, the search for information, assessment, etc.), nor to some post-purchase activity, e.g. the assessment of satisfaction, but includes a series of other activities which influence consumers' decisions and future actions”. However, Hetzel (2002) as cited in Caru and Cova (2003) was among the very few who recognised the importance of brand in the experience domain. He did not provide any formal definition of brand experience but introduced brand as one of the pillars of consumers' experience. He identified five levers on action to provide consumers' experience. They were- 'Use what the brand refers to'; 'Surprise the consumer' (and above all 'respond to the need for something unexpected'); 'Propose the extraordinary'; 'Stimulate the five senses'; and 'Create a link with the consumer'.

Meyer and Schwager (2007), in their article on 'understanding customer experiences', published in HBR, defined customer experience as, “the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company. Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representations of a company's products, services, or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth

recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews, and so forth". Further, they distinguished between Customer Experience Management (CEM) and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and strongly advocated the importance of implementing CEM as it captures and distributes a customer's subjective thoughts about a company, thus, providing information regarding his/her needs and priorities which could supplement CRM as CRM only captures and distributes what a company knows about a customer.

Similarly, based on a review of the "state-of-the-art literature on experience marketing", Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007) provided a more detailed and a comprehensive definition of experience in the customer context as, "The customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organization, which provoke a reaction. This experience is strictly personal and implies the customer's involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual). Its evaluation depends on the comparison between a customer's *expectations* and the *stimuli* coming from the interaction with the company and its offering in correspondence of the different *moments of contact or touch-points*". According to them, the central idea is to expand the transaction-based notion of customer relationship to the "continuous" concept of customer experience. Additionally, they empirically investigated the specific role of different experiential features in the success achieved by some well-known brands- Swatch, Pringles, Harley-Davidson, McDonald's, and IKEA among others.

In spite of a widespread recognition enjoyed by all the articles discussed above, we observed that these conceptual articles were mainly prescriptive in nature with an inclination towards practitioners and lacked any empirical support. In this context, Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros and Leonard (2009) rightly observed that publications on customer experience are mainly found in practitioner-oriented journals or management books. They further stated, "To the best of our knowledge only a limited number of articles explore customer experience in-depth from a theoretical perspective". They indicated that this scarcity of systematic scholarly research on the customer experience construct and customer experience management calls for a theory-based conceptual framework that can serve as a stimulus and foundation for such research.

Finally, Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) filled up this long identified gap and provided a comprehensive definition of brand experience concept. They conceptualised brand experience as, "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli (such as brand-

identifying colours, shapes, typefaces, background design elements, slogans, mascots, and brand characters) that are part of a brand's design and identity (e.g., name, logo, signage), packaging, communications (e.g., advertisements, brochures, Web sites), and environments in which the brand is marketed or sold (e.g., stores, events)".

Further, Same and Larimo (2012), in their conceptual article on experience marketing, have defined an experience as, "An economic offering and an interaction between the company/brand/service, and customer, who perceive and meaningfully experience it". They observed that experience is a complex and layered construct and gets shaped by the characteristics of the customer and those of the product, company or brand.

Table 1 enlists the major definitions of experience in various contexts which have emerged from our extant review of literature.

Table 1: Definitions of Experience

Author	Context	Definition
Alba and Hutchinson (1987)	Brand Experience	Refers to their knowledge of and familiarity with a brand or brand category.
Hui and Bateson (1991)	Service experience	The consumer's emotional feelings during the service encounter.
Carbone and Haeckel (1994)	Experience	The take away impression formed by people's encounters with products, services and businesses – a perception produced when humans consolidate sensory information. It is the aggregate and cumulative customer perception created during the process of learning about, acquiring, using, maintaining, and (sometimes) disposing of a product or service.
Pine and Gilmore (1998)	Experience	An experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event. Experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual or spiritual level.
Caru and Cova (2003)	Experience	Experience is defined as a subjective episode in the construction/transformation of the individual, with, however, an emphasis on the emotions and senses lived during the immersion at the expense of the cognitive dimension.

Author	Context	Definition
Ha and Perks (2005)	Brand Experience	Displaying a relatively high degree of familiarity with a certain subject area.
Meyer and Schwager (2007)	Customer Experience	<p>Customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company.</p> <p>Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and is usually initiated by the customer.</p> <p>Indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representations of a company's products, services, or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews, and so forth.</p>
Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007)	Customer Experience	The customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organization, which provoke a reaction. This experience is strictly personal and implies the customer's involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual)".
Alloza (2008)	Brand Experience	The perception of the consumer, at every moment of contact they have with the brand, whether it is in the brand images projected in advertising, during the first personal contact, or at the level of quality concerning the personal treatment they receive.
Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009)	Brand Experience	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.
Same and Larimo (2012)	Experience	An economic offering and an interaction between the company/brand/service, and customer, who perceive and meaningfully experience it.

Source: Adapted from Skard, Siv, Herbjørn Nysveen and Per Egil Pedersen (2011), "Brand and Customer Experience in Service Organizations: Literature Review and Brand Experience Construct Validation", SNF Working Paper No. 09/11, INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION BERGEN, APRIL 2011, ISSN 1503-2140.

Thus, this critical review of literature reveals that definition of brand experience as

provided by Brakus *et al.* (2009) can be presently considered to be the most holistic definition, including most of the aspects of experience identified in the marketing literature till date. This concept of brand experience has also been suggested as the most comprehensive notion of experience, spanning across different contexts, by Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010). Further, Nysveen, Pedersen and Skard (2013) observed, "However, given that both customers and non-customers can have brand experiences, we consider brand experience (as conceptualised by Brakus *et al.*, 2009) to be the broadest experience construct".

BRAND EXPERIENCE SCALE: DEVELOPMENT AND USE

Brakus *et al.* (2009) along with a comprehensive definition of brand experience concept provided an empirically validated brand experience scale. Based on a multi-stage study and repeated reliability and validity checks, they developed a multidimensional brand experience scale consisting of 12 items pertaining to four dimensions of brand experience-sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural. The **sensory** dimension refers to the visual, auditory, tactile, gustative, and olfactory stimulations provided by a brand; the **affective** dimension, includes feelings generated by the brand and its emotional bond with the consumer; the **intellectual** dimension, refers to the ability of the brand to engage consumers' convergent and divergent thinking; and the **behavioural** dimension, includes bodily experiences, lifestyles, and interactions with the brand. This was the beginning of meaningful empirical work related to brand experience. However, their sample was limited to university students at most of the stages of the study, thus, putting a question mark on the generalizability of the brand experience scale proposed by them.

Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) tried to overcome this shortcoming of using only the student sample by conducting a field study with actual consumers. They used Brakus *et al.* (2009) brand experience scale to identify clusters of the consumers based on their average ratings on each of the four dimensions of brand experience scale. Although it was a good attempt in terms of type of sample and statistical techniques used to relate brand experience with brand attitudes and purchase intentions, only a few product brands were included for this analysis.

Further, Iglesias *et al.* (2011) also empirically validated the brand experience scale proposed by Brakus *et al.* (2009) while studying how brand experience determines brand loyalty. However, they considered the effect of only one mediating variable - affective commitment - on the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty.

Their study was limited to a student sample and focussed only on product categories of cars, laptops and sneakers.

Nysveen *et al.* (2013) commenting on the available views on experience in the marketing literature, have rightly stated that underpinning much of the literature on brand experience is the recognition of hedonistic aspects of goods and services; hence some value creation beyond functional aspects. Additionally, they empirically filled up the long standing gap in the brand experience literature by applying the brand experience scale as proposed by Brakus *et al.* (2009) on a service category of telecommunication service provider. They tried to validate the brand experience dimensions as proposed by Brakus *et al.* (2009) and introduced a new dimension called relational experience.

BRAND LOYALTY: MEANING AND IMPORTANCE

The development and maintenance of brand loyalty is placed at the heart of companies' marketing plans, especially in the face of highly competitive markets with increasing unpredictability and reducing product differentiation (Fournier and Yao, 1997). Brand loyalty is one of the most-cited concepts in marketing literature since the idea was first identified (Knox and Walker, 2001; Lau and Lee, 1999) in the seminal work of Copeland (1923) around 90 years ago as brand insistence. Brand insistence combines the behavioural index of exclusive purchase with an out-of-stock decision that another brand would only be purchased in the case of an emergency. This fact is substantiated by Howard and Sheth's observation (1969) that the importance of brand loyalty has been recognized in the marketing literature for at least three decades pointing towards the timeless managerial relevance of this concept.

Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) reviewed over 200 studies and provided one of the earliest conceptual definitions of brand loyalty. According to them, brand loyalty is: "The (a) biased, (b) behavioural response, (c) expressed over time, (d) by some decision-making unit, (e) with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands, and (f) is a function of psychological (decision-making, evaluative) processes".

According to Oliver (1997) brand loyalty refers to the tendency to be loyal to a focal brand, which is demonstrated by the intention to buy the brand as a primary choice. This definition was modified and made more explicit by Oliver (1999). In this paper, brand loyalty was defined as, "A deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronise a preferred

product or service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same- brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour.”

Davis-Sramek, Mentzer and Stank (2008) summarised that brand loyalty has been defined in terms of repeat purchasing, a positive attitude, long-term commitment, intention to continue the relationship, expressing positive word-of-mouth, likelihood of not switching, or any combination of these.

The broad range of benefits derived from brand loyalty is well-accepted by both academics and practitioners. A review of literature (Aaker, 1991; Delgado- Ballester and Munuera –Aleman, 2001; Pritchard, Havitz and Howard, 1999; Reichheld and Schefter, 2000) reveals that firms selling brands with a high rate of loyal consumers have a competitive advantage over other firms as brand loyalty facilitates customer retention efforts by providing a substantial entry barrier to the competitors and an increase in the firm's ability to respond to competitive threats as well as reduced marketing costs, more new customers, and greater trade leverage.

Further, Dick and Basu (1994) suggested the other loyalty-related marketing advantages, such as favourable word of mouth and greater resistance among loyal consumers to competitive strategies i.e., a customer base less sensitive to the marketing efforts of competitors. A lot of eminent scholars including Athanassopoulos, Gounaris and Stathakopoulos (2001); Jacoby and Chestnut (1978); Pessemier (1959); and Reichheld (1996) are of the view that brand-loyal consumers may be willing to pay more for a brand because they perceive some unique value in the brand that no alternative can provide. Further, Assael (1998) observed that brand loyalty leads to greater sales and revenue leading to greater market share when the same brand is repeatedly purchased by loyal consumers, irrespective of situational constraints.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BRAND EXPERIENCE AND BRAND LOYALTY

A positive relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty has been proposed in a number of studies though with a lack of empirical support in a majority of these studies. For instance, Sheth and Venkatesan (1968) proposed that brand loyalty is developed through the experience of repurchasing a brand over time. Similarly, Smith and

Swinyard (1983) proposed that the more frequent the prior experience, the stronger the attitude. Carbone and Haeckel (1994) clearly recognised experience as one of the paths along with the product's performance and the service's performance which can lead to customer preference. They observed, based on their real-life experiences, engineering customer experiences is an important- and largely unexploited- strategy for establishing and maintaining customer preference. In the same direction, Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar (1998) proposed that positive prior experiences foster commitment to the brand. Also, Oliver (1999) proposed that loyalty begins to grow only when the consumer begins to evaluate his or her consumption experiences with the brand.

Further, Berry, Carbone and Haeckel (2002) reported that to compete successfully in the competitive territory, a growing number of organizations were systematically applying the principles and tools of customer-experience management i.e., combining functional and emotional benefits in their offerings to strengthen loyalty. Similarly, Duffy (2003) proposed that to encourage loyalty a company should be focussed and passionate about creating a great product or service brand experience for their customers. Bennett, Hartel and McColl-Kennedy (2005) asserted that an understanding of the role of previous experience with a purchase decision is critical to an understanding of the development of attitudinal brand loyalty.

Ha and Perks (2005) stated greater brand experience is not only associated with familiarity, but also impacts crucially on understanding, enjoying, enhancing and fostering the brand. They further stated that consumers' satisfaction and loyalty develops as a result of the consumers' positive experience with the brand which will positively affect brand commitment and re-purchase intentions and improves brand reputation. Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle (2006) stated, "For building brand loyalty, consumers' experiences are all important".

Similarly, Crosby and Johnson (2007) observed that with the trend today toward commoditization and increasing price and quality parity, engaging with customers emotionally—through the brand experience—often provides the best opportunities for differentiation.

In their study, Brakus *et al.* (2009) indicated a positive relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty and empirically validated it on a sample of university students. In fact, Curran, Sajeev and Rosen (2010) are among the very few who have

empirically validated this relationship. In their study, they proved that experience has an extremely important influence on attitude and plays a significant role in purchase likelihood for the loyalty condition. Also, Iglesias *et al.* (2011) based on a sample of MBA students, empirically proved that consumers with greater brand experiences develop higher levels of brand loyalty through affective commitment. They suggested that in a complex environment where the brands face a fierce competition, the possibility of differentiating brands depends largely on their ability to deliver top consumer experiences that succeed in engaging consumers in a long-term relationship.

To conclude, in spite of such a frequent mention of “experience” in literature, Schmitt (2011) rightly observed that still “experience”, as a concept and as an empirical phenomenon, is not yet as established as other consumer and marketing concepts such as choice, attitudes, consumer satisfaction, or brand equity. Thus, there exists a wide conceptual and empirical gap to understand the role played by brand experience in creating differentiation resulting in consumers' preference for a particular brand.

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