

The Nature of the Brand Experience

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Abstract

Purpose – The objective of this research is to better understand the nature of the brand experience and how brand, experience, and (brand) meaning relate to each other in forming the brand experience. Furthermore, by investigating these concepts and their relations, this research hopes to find support for the fact that brand experience cannot be evaluated based on a spectrum of good and bad, but it can only be evaluated based on the (brand) meanings evoked by the experience.

Design/Methodology – This research includes a literature review and a qualitative research design (phenomenology) which investigates brand identity and brand image of five companies in the airline industry. The qualitative research fits the purpose of this research as it attempts to uncover the brand meanings that emerge in the experience and how customers evaluate their experience in relation to the brand.

Findings – This research has provided support for the fact that a brand is a meaning that is communicated to customers through their experiences (embodiment of the brand proposition). Brand experience is perceived as meanings and cannot simply be evaluated along a good/bad spectrum; and thus, the nature of the brand experience is grounded on these meanings.

Originality/Value – The main value of this research is that it has explored the nature of the brand experience, and in such provides companies with an increased understanding of how to better their branding strategies and academic research with a foundation to further build on research regarding (the nature of the) brand experience.

Limitations – Limitations of this research are concerned with the fact that (a) only one industry has been analysed (one that offers homogeneous services); (b) the establishing of brand propositions is affected by subjectivity; (c) the analysis was limited to customers, and did not analyse meaning that emerged for non-customers; and (d) this research did not elaborate the role of service design in brand experience. These limitations could be addressed in future research.

Keywords – Brand Experience; Brand; Experience; Brand Meaning; Brand Identity; Brand Image; Brand Proposition; Airline Branding

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1. INTRODUCTION

Customer experience is a “multidimensional construct focusing on a customer’s cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial, and social responses to a firm’s offerings during the customer’s entire purchase journey” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p.71). The focus on customer experience has grown over the last decades as – due to advancements in technology – the number of touchpoints present in the customer journey is continuously increasing, while at the same time the customer journey is becoming more and more nonlinear (Lewnes & Keller, 2019). This progression is increasingly complicating the management of the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). It is, however, incredibly important for companies to understand the way their customers experience the company to develop suitable marketing and branding strategies (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantello, 2009). Optimising the customer experience can provide a company with the ability to distinguish themselves from the competition and the ability to establish customer loyalty through the formation of emotional relationships (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2011; Lewnes & Keller, 2019).

It is important to keep in mind that consumption is interactive, subjective, and an exchange of intangibles (e.g., Helkkula, 2011; Helkkula, Kelleher & Pihlström, 2012; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Consequently, a significant part of understanding the customer experience is the measurement of a customer’s expectations and perceptions of a company’s offering (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This view puts more focus on the brand promise (or the brand meaning proposition), the customers’ expectations and brand meaning. Brand meaning may consist of both (a) the embedment of meaning in the experience by the brand through the embodiment of their brand proposition, and (b) perceptions customers gather through experiences and interactions with the brand (e.g., Krippendorff, 1989; Michel, 2017). These components of brand meaning are aligned with Sherry’s (2005, p.40) view, who states that a brand stores *and* proposes meaning; a brand “is both a storehouse and a powerhouse of meaning”.

According to Bapat (2020) a brand may be viewed as an experience that is enjoyed by individuals each day. In line with this, Clatworthy (2012) approaches customer experience from a branding perspective. Similarly, he mentions that the customer experience is increasingly becoming more important. The author (ibid.) adds that it is highly important for companies to deliver aligned services and this alignment can be created by matching customer experience with the brand proposition, ensuring a positive brand experience. Brakus et al. (2009, p.52) define brand experience as “sensations, feelings, cognitions, behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments”. This definition appears to be one of the most commonly adopted in literature and mostly addresses the means by which brand experience is created; however, it does not tackle the idea that brand experience might be viewed as perceptions in the customers’ minds – brand meanings – as mentioned prior.

Krippendorff (1989) states that customers do not perceive things (tangible products), but rather, they perceive meanings (intangible aspects of products). Further detailing this, Delgado-Ballester & Sabiote (2016) argue that value resides not solely in the utilitarian functions of a brand, but also in the experience of the brand through all stages of the customer journey. It is, therefore, incredibly important for marketers to understand the role that (brand) meaning and experience play in the shaping of a brand as this will provide them with a more detailed understanding on how to improve brand experience.

Identifying brand experience as being among the most auspicious consumer research concepts over the last ten years, Andreini, Pedeliento, Zarantello and Soleiro (2018) mention that, although managers increasingly focus their attention on the brand experience, research has failed to operationalise the construct in detail. Many aspects related to brand experience have been researched; however, a lot of such research focuses on specific brand constructs as opposed to brand experience as a whole. Schmitt (2012) highlights this problem and provides a solution as he states that research could profit from a wider lens and integration of various findings to develop a more comprehensive framework. So, with the aim to fill this gap, the research conducted in this paper will focus on developing a deeper understanding of the nature of the brand experience by integrating findings on different perspectives.

So, the objective of this research is to better understand the nature of the brand experience and how the aforementioned concepts of brand, (brand) meaning, and experience relate to each other in forming the brand experience. By investigating these concepts and their relations, this research hopes to find support for the fact that brand experience cannot be evaluated based on a spectrum of good and bad, but it can only be evaluated based on the brand meanings evoked by the experience (which are embedded in the service interactions). And so, this research will provide an answer to the following question:

How are the concepts of brand, experience, and (brand) meaning connected in forming the brand experience?

In order to address this problem, this research question is broken into three smaller ones. This way, the following sub-questions – that will be mostly addressed through the literature review – have been established:

- (a) *What is the relationship between brand and experience?*
- (b) *What is the relationship between experience and (brand) meaning?*

(c) What is the relationship between (brand) meaning and brand?

Each of the theories that are discussed in this thesis will provide a puzzle piece to answering these questions. In addition to a theoretical review, a qualitative research within the airline industry has been conducted. The aim of this qualitative research is to analyse how a brand comes alive during an experience; whether brands are perceived in terms of their brand proposition; to figure out how good a given airline is at 'being' its own brand promise; and overall to provide empirical evidence backing up the theoretical framework.

This research contributes to theory as it provides a more detailed description of the relationships between brand, experience, and (brand) meaning. Together these relationships provide a better understanding of the nature of the brand experience, which is currently missing – as will be explained later. In addition, an increased understanding of this interplay will enable researchers to further analyse these relationships empirically to form a clearer and more complete conceptualisation of the nature of the brand experience and the emergence of (brand) meaning. Furthermore, based on the research conducted in this thesis (and its limitations) various directions of future research will be provided.

The challenge for marketers in building a strong brand is ensuring that customers have the right type of experience with products and services and their accompanying marketing programs so that the desired thoughts, feelings, images, beliefs, perceptions, opinions, and so on become linked to the brand. (Keller, 2001, p.3)

This research also provides a contribution to practice as it provides companies with an increased knowledge on the interplay between their brand and customer experience. In addition, with an increased understanding of the relationship between brand, experience, and (brand) meaning, companies will get a broader idea of the ways their branding strategies can influence the brand experience. As Klabi (2020) mentions, brand experience is one of the biggest predictors of customer perceptions towards a product/service. Additionally, brand experience clarifies why customers tend to prefer one brand over the other (Diallo & Siqueira Jr., 2017). This increased understanding of brand experience can thus be of significant help to companies who are trying to figure out their position in the market and find opportunities to differentiate themselves. Furthermore, a more elaborate understanding of the brand experience construct can provide help to companies that want to improve brand-related outcomes, such as brand associations and brand equity (Bapat, 2020).

In the following section various topics related to (a) brand experience, (b) brand, (c) experience, (d) (brand) meaning, and (e) their relations, will be discussed in a theoretical framework. This section will be followed by a detailed description of the methods used and steps undertaken in the qualitative research. After this, the empirical research will be outlined, and the findings of the analysis will be presented and discussed. The final section provides a conclusion of the research including limitations, directions for further research and the contributions of this research to theory and practice. For the appendices of this thesis, please refer to the attachment.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory reviewed for this research was gathered by means of (1) recommendations by a branding expert, which mostly include established literature from renowned writers in the field; (2) citation chaining, which also mostly includes established literature from renowned writers in the field; and (3) articles found on Scopus with an inclusion criteria of articles published between 2016-2020, written in the English language and in the subject area Business, Management and Accounting, which thus consists of most recent and relevant literature. In the following sections the main topic 'brand experience' will be discussed as well as the separate concepts – brand, experience, and (brand) meaning – and their relations. Brand experience will be reviewed based on what has been presented in the literature in relation to this construct; this review grounds the current research problem. The separate concepts – brand, experience, and (brand) meaning – will be reviewed based on what has been presented in the literature on these separate concepts in order to build on this, uncover relations, and form a theoretical framework. This will be done in order to gather the puzzle pieces and fit them together. For an overview of the literature and the topics, see Appendix 1 (for the appendices, please refer to the attachment).

On Brand Experience

Brakus et al. (2009) have presented an analysis of brand experience and a scale to measure it. The authors (ibid., p.53) state that brand experience can be conceptualised as the "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments". Similarly, Andreini et al. (2018, p.128) state that brand experience is the outcome of active interactions between brand cues (enabled by a company) and customers. The authors (ibid.) view brand experiences as subjective responses and they state that brand experiences can form relationships between individuals. In stating this, they (ibid.) emphasise the importance of the 'relational dimension' of brand experience and the notion that a brand can be considered a phenomenon that is constructed by society. Stach (2018) proposes a definition, which – as he

acknowledges himself – differs from that of Brakus et al. (2009). According to Stach (2018, p.3), brand experience is “a bodily interaction between a consumer, the branded product and any other stakeholder group, the consumer deems relevant for the experience”. His definition stresses that the interactions need to be deemed relevant (by the customer) for the experience. A simpler definition is that of Yu and Yuan (2019), who state that customers can create brand experiences by using a brand and communicating the brand’s messages to other people (word-of-mouth).

Brakus et al. (2009) make a clear distinction between brand experience and other brand-related constructs; these distinctions will be discussed in this paragraph. As mentioned before, brand experience is made up of the specific internal consumer and behavioural responses which are the result of brand-related stimuli. As these responses are specific, brand experience is not the same as *brand attitudes*, as these are more general responses and judgements. Furthermore, brand experiences can take place regardless of whether customers show interest in a brand. In this aspect, brand experience differs from *brand involvement*, as this assumes a predetermined motivation of consumers when interacting with a brand. An even stronger form of brand involvement is the concept of *brand attachment*, which occurs when customers develop an emotional relationship with a brand. Brand experience should not be viewed from an emotional relationship viewpoint, as emotional relationships are merely an outcome of brand experience, not an input. Finally, brand experiences are feelings, cognitions, sensations, and behavioural responses, whereas the concept of *brand personality* is the endowment of personality on a brand and not on actual customer responses.

In their brand experience scale, Brakus et al. (2009) include four dimensions of experience (gathered from a literature review and then ensured through an open-ended survey). Furthermore, it includes the level of experience which is evoked by the brand on each of the four dimensions. The items are focused on the degree to which a customer has one of the four experiences with a brand and are thoroughly checked and continuously reduced to an acceptable amount (by means of literature, surveys, and contributions from experts). Figure 1 shows the model proposed by Brakus et al. (2009).

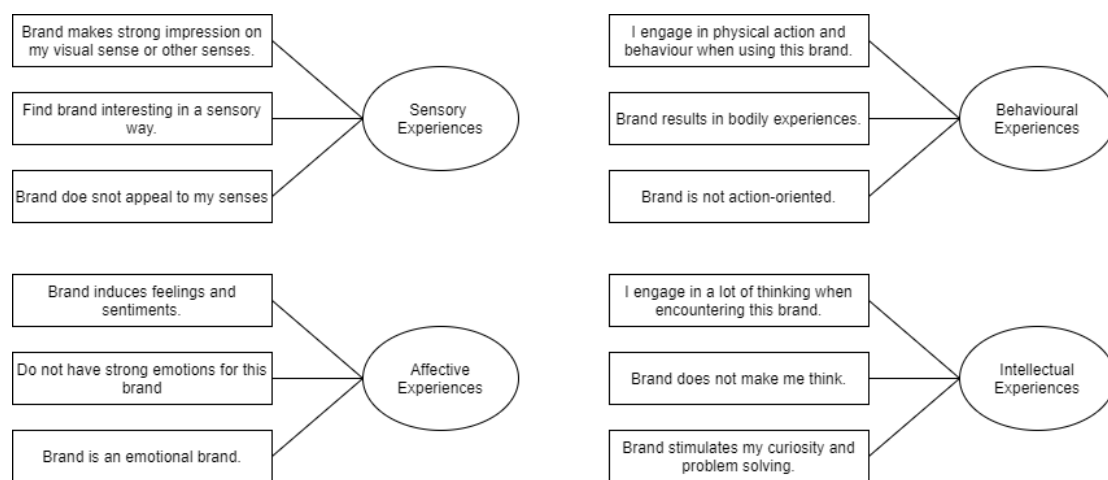


Figure 1: Brakus et al.'s (2009) brand experience scale
Source: Adapted from Brakus et al. (2009)

Brakus et al. (2009) found that brand experience has a direct effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty, and an indirect effect mediated by brand personality associations. Nysveen, Pedersen and Skard (2013), who have based their research on that of Brakus et al.'s. (2009), conceptualise brand experience as a construct consisting of multiple dimensions that clarifies the establishment of customer loyalty. These authors have tested the scale developed by Brakus et al. (2009) and added a fifth dimension of experience (*relational*; which is included in Schmitt's (1999) model – as will be discussed later on – but excluded in Brakus et al.'s (2009) scale). Nysveen et al. (2013) mention that customers buy products not for their functional aspects, rather they buy them for the experience. Furthermore, the authors mention that very limited research has been conducted on the underlying dimensions related to constructs of experience. Moreover, Nysveen et al. (2013) mention that the brand experience construct can be considered as the broadest of all experience constructs as it also includes non-customers. Non-customers are those people who are not directly engaged with the company and therefore do not buy the product/service offered; but are indirectly exposed to the brand through, for example, advertising (Nysveen et al., 2013; Brakus et al., 2009). Helkkula et al. (2012) mention that an experience can be either lived (e.g. participation) or imaginary (e.g. advertisement, recommendation). Brand experience therefore focuses on the importance of not only direct interactions, but also indirect interactions of customers with a company/brand (Nysveen et al., 2013).

In their research, Nysveen et al. (2013) propose various hypotheses related to several brand constructs and their relationships. These relationships occur between each of the experience dimensions (and other brand-related constructs;

brand personality, -satisfaction, and -loyalty). The results showed that only the relational dimension had a significant effect on brand loyalty. Furthermore, brand experience as a whole had a positive effect on brand personality, but out of the dimensions only the relational and sensory experiences had a positive effect on brand personality. Brand personality appeared to have a positive effect on brand satisfaction and brand loyalty, and brand satisfaction in turn had a positive effect on brand loyalty. Moreover, it appeared that the added brand experience dimension – relational experience – had the strongest impact on all constructs measured.

Interestingly, Nysveen et al. (2013) did not find significant direct effects of brand experience on brand loyalty and brand satisfaction, which Brakus et al. (2009) did. This becomes even more interesting as the only dimension of brand experience in Nysveen et al.'s (2013) model that does have a significant direct effect on brand loyalty and brand satisfaction is the relational dimension. This dimension, however, was not present in Brakus et al.'s (2009) model. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show both of their models.

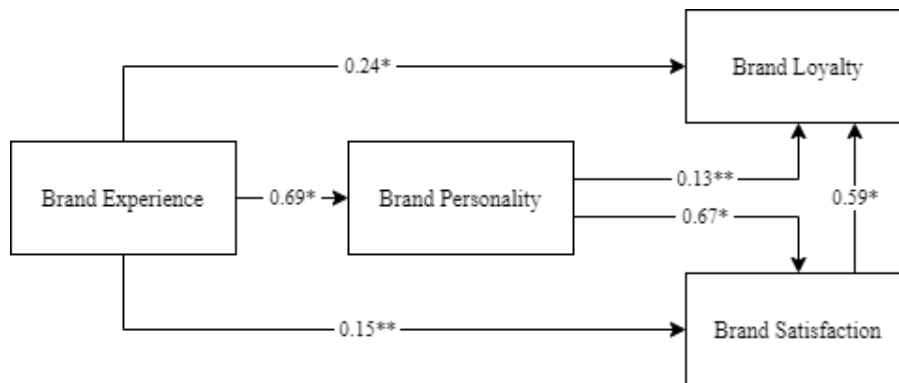


Figure 2: Brand Experience Model Brakus et al. (2009)
 Source: Adapted from Brakus et al. (2009)

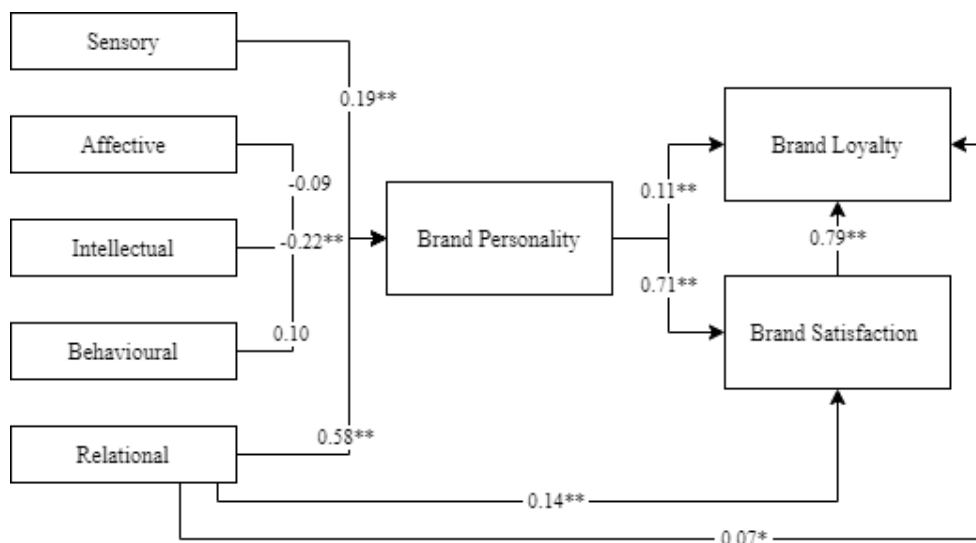


Figure 3: Brand Experience Model Nysveen et al. (2013)

Source: Adapted from Nysveen et al. (2013) – The relations of the separate brand experience constructs (except 'relational') with brand loyalty and brand satisfaction are left out for clarity as these relationships were negative and/or insignificant.

It is thus clear, that the aforementioned researchers mostly focus on the parts that inform brand experience, and its outcomes. And, although they do underline the importance of getting the brand experience 'right', it is important to also look at the deeper underlying nature of the brand experience and specifically what the brand experience is composed of. Therefore, the following sections will discuss the literature on brand, experience, (brand) meaning, and their relations. This will provide a better understanding of (a) how a brand comes to life; (b) how research on experience has evolved over the years and the role of experience as a mediator in the relation between brand and (brand) meaning; (c) how (brand) meanings emerge; and (d) how a brand can be perceived as meanings.

Brand

A brand essentially is a way for companies to differentiate themselves from competitors (Wood, 2000). Berry (2000) speaks of the 'presented brand' which includes a brand's official communication of what it stands for and its purpose; comprised of its advertising, logo, exterior, symbols, etc. Similarly, Kapferer (2008, p.171) defines brand as "the vision that drives the creation of products and services under that name", which includes its key beliefs and core values, otherwise known as brand identity. Keller (2001) describes the creation of a sound brand identity as the first step in the formation of brand equity. Brand identity can be defined as the collection of exclusive brand associations that a company wishes to create and uphold, and the symbols that allows for customers to recognise the brand (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). Keller (2001) expresses that brand identity essentially describes who the brand is and Black & Veloutsou (2017) build on this by stating that brand identity should include the core characteristics that define a brand.

These definitions are mostly concerned with the brand as perceived from a company's viewpoint (brand identity) and lacks the perception of brand from the customers' viewpoint. Wood (2000) discuss various definitions of brand from literature and found that there appear to be a multitude of approaches used in defining brand. The author (ibid.) mentions the definition of brand by the American Marketing Association (1960), who state that a brand is a combination of a company's characteristics (e.g., name, design) that should increase the recognisability of the product/service the company offers. This definition is mostly focused on the company's perspective of a brand and is highly focused on the product/service offered. A definition that focuses more on the customers' interpretation of a brand's characteristics is that of Ambler (1992), which according to Wood (2000), states that a brand is the (promised) characteristics that are provided to the customers and might provide satisfaction; these can be tangible or intangible, real or imagined, and emotional or rational.

Roy and Banerjee (2014) also acknowledge this distinction between brand from a company's perspective and a customer's perspective and do so in the form of brand identity and brand image. The authors mention that the message a brand communicates to the outside world is wrapped as its identity (by the brand itself) and unwrapped as its image (by the customers). They further mention that brand identity and brand image should be as aligned as possible, which can be mainly assured by providing communications which are consistent.

Maurya and Mishra (2012) acknowledge that, even though the brand construct has been discussed by many authors over a wide timespan, a consensus regarding the definition of brand has not been reached yet. These authors (ibid.) therefore have collected a multitude of definitions found in literature to provide researchers with a clear overview and analysis of existing definitions. In this analysis, they do recognise that brand cannot be defined easily. Concluding their analysis, they state that a brand should be viewed holistically as it provides value to many stakeholders. Furthermore, the authors (ibid, p.128) mention that this value and the meaning attributed to it is subjective and individual in nature, and "it is shaped by the interaction of company and stakeholders over a period of time and driven by the vision of the organization". And, just as Roy and Banerjee (2014) mention, Maurya and Mishra (2012) state that companies should assure alignment between brand identity and brand image.

According to Michel (2017) and apparent in the aforementioned definitions, research defines brand identity as a list of characteristics that define a brand, that should be stable and aligned with strategy. Essentially, it can be viewed as being the core, unique associations that identify the brand, and is viewed as being created by the brand itself (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Stach, 2018). However, this view is quite simple and to grasp the complexity of brands, many other researchers (according to Michel, 2017) talk about 'brand meaning', which entails that "people bring and add sense to a brand because they make the brand theirs" (ibid, p.454).

So, according to Michel (2017) brand identity can be viewed as a foundation and when people try to make sense of a brand by making it theirs, they create brand meaning. This perspective seems to be similar to that of the aforementioned researchers, who instead use the term brand image instead of brand meaning. However, Michel (2017) mentions brand identity as a *source* of brand meaning and thus does not separate brand identity and brand meaning (or image) as two separate constructs. This will be discussed in more detail in the sub-chapter '(brand) meaning'.

To create brand meaning, one of the most important steps is to provide a consistent connection between the brand and design (Karjalainen & Snelders, 2010; Clatworthy, 2012). This connection can be created by conducting 'semantic transformation', which enables the transformation of 'qualitative brand descriptions' into 'value-based design features'; this transformation causes the envisioned meanings to emerge (Karjalainen & Snelders, 2010; Clatworthy, 2012). In their research, Karjalainen & Snelders (2010) focus on product design, whether Clatworthy (2012) focuses on service design. This knowledge is relevant, since Berry (2000) highlights the importance of delivering an experience which is in line with the presented brand; as the presented brand on its own is able to increase awareness of a brand, however it cannot save a service that is weak.

Brand & Experience

The company proposes value to their customers in the form of the brand offering – the embodiment of the brand proposition in the experience. The customer, in turn, is the one who (co-)creates value by using the product/service and evaluating/making sense of the firm's value proposition (the experience; Akaka, Vargo & Schau, 2014). And, "just as consumers' interpretations of a firm's proposition change the meaning of a product or brand for consumers, the value proposition of a firm is susceptible to change through the interaction of firms with customers as well" (ibid., p.214). And thus, value and meaning attributed to a brand are formed through interactions between the company and its customers (Maurya & Mishra, 2012). So, it is important to remember that not only (brand) meaning can change through experiences, but also the brand (proposition) itself. This shows how powerful customers are and how a brand hinges on experiences; as Lewnes and Keller (2019) state: "Experience is the new brand".

Brand & (Brand) Meaning

Brand meaning is a construct that exists only in the minds of the customer, and the customer is able to use these (brand) meanings to form associations (based on the experience) and connect these to the brand (Stach, 2018). As Fournier (1998) mention, relationship theory defines a brand as a cluster of perceptions that are stored in the customer's mind. This is strengthened by Batey (2016), who states that from a marketer's point of view, a brand is seen as a promise; from a customer's point of view, a brand is seen as a cluster of associations and perceptions that take shape and live in the customers' minds. These associations come to exist, according to Batey (2016), through every experience and every interaction that takes place between the customer and the brand. In summary, a brand can be defined as "a cluster of meanings" (ibid., p.6), and with each interaction and each experience the customer has with the brand, this cluster of meanings can take on a different form. This fact makes that each brand is unique despite homogeneous offerings (ibid.).

Experience

According to Berry (2000), the main brand for organisations offering packaged goods is the product, and the main brand for organisations offering services is the company. Products are tangible and services are intangible; as brands can increase the trust a customer has in the purchasing of intangibles, branding is especially important for those companies offering services (ibid.). Strong brands can gain a customer's trust and provide customers with the opportunity to increase their understanding of the service (ibid.). Perhaps, most important for service organisations, is the fact that strong brands enable them to differentiate themselves in markets in which it is difficult to do so because of homogeneous offerings (ibid.).

Opposing the views of Berry (2000), products are increasingly seen as means to supply services and experiences (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Schmitt, 1999); and thus, the lines between service organisations and product organisations are fading. Vargo and Lusch (2004) explain the shift of view from an exchange of tangible products to intangible aspects of products as they propose the 'service-dominant logic'. Clatworthy (2012) mentions that a service is offered through various touch points and relies on behaviours and interaction between customers and brands. Furthermore, firms are seen not as simple providers of services, but as creators of value propositions (Merz et al., 2009). Even though Berry (2000) believes in a distinction between product and service organisations, he does highlight the importance of experience in building a brand. For him (ibid.), marketing communications assist in building a brand, but the most influential tool to build a strong brand is the actual experience customers have with a service. This 'actual experience' shapes the brand meaning and in turn increases brand equity (ibid.).

The aforementioned views frame the customer experience from a holistic viewpoint and can be linked to an approach to marketing which first started to gain ground late 1990s, which is known as experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999). As individuals are not only rational, but also emotional, Schmitt (1999) views consumers as being attracted to achieving experiences which are pleasurable. Experiential marketing thus focuses on the rational and emotional nature of consumers and the holistic customer experience. Schmitt (1999) proposes five 'strategic experiential modules' (types of experiences) which can be created by companies: (1) Sensory (SENSE) – addresses a person's senses; (2) Affective (FEEL) – addresses a person's emotions and feelings; (3) Creative Cognitive (THINK) – addresses a person's intellect; (4) Physical, behaviours and lifestyles (ACT) – addresses a person's physical experiences; and (5) Social-identity (RELATE) – addresses a person's relationship to their outside world. The author (ibid.) views the brand as a means to provide these experiences, which can ultimately lead to brand experiences that are exceptional and memorable. He states that customers do not only want the functional aspects of a product, but experiences that are relatable, can be integrated into their way of life, and that are able to speak to their senses, affect their heart and incite their mind (ibid.). Furthermore, if a customer's brand experience takes place in a special context, this can help the customer to find the experience more meaningful, increase their involvement in the experience, and increase their willingness to store the experience in their mind (Legendre, Cartier & Warnick, 2020). This indicates that special/meaningful experiences might be stored in a customer's memory deeper and thus increase the level of positive associations stored in their mind.

Wertz (2019) states that experiential marketing engages customers directly by allowing customers to experience brands actively as opposed to passively. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, p.132) suggest that the experiential view “regards consumption as a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and esthetic criteria”. These authors (ibid.) also discuss the shift from viewing products as tangibles to viewing products as services. In their discussion, they mostly focus on those meanings that are symbolic and possess characteristics that are subjective. These include the aspects of a product which provide, for example, entertainment or leisure, which can be both verbal and non-verbal and are mostly aimed at stimulating consumers’ senses (in line with Schmitt (1999)). Solomon (1983) describe this experiential view as an understanding that the customer experience goes far beyond only purchases. Furthermore, Bapat (2020) states that experience has the ability to result in value; the outcome of the value generated from experience is that customers form positive associations with a company and its brand and will therefore be more motivated to become loyal customers. So, brand experience does not only influence “past-directed satisfaction judgments but also future-directed consumer loyalty” (Bapat, 2020, p.11).

Several decades after Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), Vargo and Lusch (2004) proposed an extensive explanation for this shift of dominant logic from the economic exchange of tangible products to the economic exchange of intangibles (i.e. services). In a sub-sequent article the authors (ibid., 2008) have rectified various mistakes and commented on received criticism; they explicitly state that ‘the service-dominant logic’ is not a view that they invented, rather it is an identification of the shift in view. It seems that this evolution is in line with the shift that Holbrook and Hirschman already proposed in 1982.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, p.132) further mention that the experiential view sees experiences as being phenomenological and “directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings, and fun”. This phenomenological view is further elaborated by Helkkula (2011), who mentions that phenomenological experiences are inter-subjective in nature and person specific. These phenomenological experiences seem to fit right in the concept of the brand experience, as the brand experience is characterised by the unique personal characteristics of experiences and therefore can be seen as subjective outcomes based on experiences and perceptions (Berry, Wall & Carbone, 2006; Brakus et al., 2009; Iglesias, Ind & Alfaro, 2013; Nysveen et al., 2013).

Interestingly, the experiential view seems to be more focused on ‘extraordinary experiences’ (pursuit of fantasies) and less on ‘phenomenological experiences’. In their article from 2004, Vargo and Lusch use the term ‘experiential’ when talking about phenomenological experiences, and in their rectification from 2008, the authors explain why confusion can arise between the terms, when in fact, they are similar. They mainly realised that often the term ‘experience’ seems to be interpreted as something along the lines of a ‘Disneyworld event’ (ibid., 2008). However, when looking at experience in the sense of it being phenomenologically determined, then the two terms can be used interchangeably (ibid.).

The research on service experience is broadened by Helkkula et al. (2012) as they investigate value-in-the-experience from a phenomenological viewpoint and in the context of the customers’ ‘lifeworlds’. In doing so, these authors (ibid., p.59) define value-in-the-experience as “individual service customers’ lived experiences of value that extent beyond the current context of service use to also include past and future experiences and service customers’ broader lifeworld contexts”. With this view in mind, the authors focus on the following aspects of an experience:

- (1) Subjectivity, both inter-subjective and intra-subjective;
- (2) Interaction, both direct and indirect;
- (3) Iterative sense-making, through past experiences; and
- (4) Context-specific, based on social context and lifeworld.

In their discussion of the ‘organic view of the brand’ – which will be discussed in more detail further on – Iglesias et al. (2013) mention that a customer’s overall experience, and as a result the brand value, is majorly impacted by the value-in-use aspects of products and the interaction of customers with employees. According to Akaka et al. (2014, p.211), “value-in-use represents the value derived through integration and use, or application, of an available resource”. Nicely explained by Ind and Coates (2013), value is not something intrinsic to a product, but value is created through the way a customer interacts with the product through using it. In other words, the customer creates value for itself (Ind & Coates, 2013) and when individuals evaluate experiences and engage with and interact with others, in order to create value for others and themselves, they contribute to the co-creation of collective meanings (Akaka et al., 2014). Hultén (2011) therefore mentions that interactions between customers and companies can be leveraged in order to influence the process of value creation.

In summary, value-in-the-experience should not be viewed as an objective way to determine value, but it should be viewed as subjective way a customer makes sense of an experience within social contexts (Helkkula et al., 2012). In addition, value-in-the-experience can be based on past experiences, other people’s experiences, and even on imaginary experiences (ibid.). As Kelleher & Peppard (2011) state:

When adopting a phenomenological perspective, we seek to understand the consumer experience of value creation as opposed to uniquely focusing on organisations' attempts to embed value in their market offerings or their efforts to appropriate value from the immaterial and often unpaid labour of consumers for the organisations' own commercial benefit. (p.325)

This citation demonstrates that companies embed value in their market offerings, while customers create value by making sense of this offering.

Akaka et al. (2014) combine two streams of literature – consumer culture theory and service-dominant logic – in order to better understand the experiential view and the phenomenological view of value creation, the ways in which value is created within contexts, and the ways in which customers evaluate experiences.

The stream of consumer culture theory views cultures as being constructed of (1) meanings, which are heterogeneous; and (2) viewpoints from all stakeholders, which overlap and continuously change (Akaka et al., 2014). According to Arnould and Thompson (2005) consumer culture theory investigates the ways in which customers actively revise symbolic meanings that are embedded in a company's advertising, stores, etc. in order to apply these to their personal context and, in turn advance and alter their individuality and personal goals. Andreini et al. (2018) emphasise this as they state that consumer culture theory is essentially a lens, which customers can use to create, make sense of, and value experiences by comparing them to and seeking alignment with their culture and ability to enhance their self-identity.

The stream of service-dominant logic focuses on the fact that service providers are unable to create value by themselves. Service providers can be seen as the one who create value propositions, whereas service users are the ones who are able to co-create value as they evaluate experiences by incorporating and applying the value proposition of the service provider (Akaka et al., 2014). This implies that value is not created by evaluating a product; products are simply a means to provide services. The evaluation of *service experiences* allows for value creation (Andreini et al., 2018). Akaka et al. (2014, p.211) suggest that “value is always co-created in markets because value is phenomenologically derived and determined by a service beneficiary (e.g., customers) through the use of a market offering”. Andreini et al. (2018) acknowledge the fact that *brands* cannot be seen as only being shaped by marketers, rather brands are established as interactions occur between the company and the customers, in which customers are the ones who actively shape brand meanings. So, through experience and engagement with all stakeholders, customers can co-create brand meaning (ibid.). It should be noted that interactions are always context-specific and thus always affect the way experiences are evaluated (ibid.). This also means that experiences are shaped uniquely by the customer (Helkkula et al., 2012).

Hultén (2011) goes deeper into this process of value co-creation and states that value is created when the sensory experiences of customers are engaged in interaction during the process of value generation. This value, or brand image, depends on the customers' perceptions of and experiences with the service. The author (ibid.) has developed a multi-sensory brand experience concept, which builds on the influence of sensory experiences on the brand experience. A sensory experience can be defined as a perception of any element in the service experience that activates the customer's mind and stimulates its senses (ibid.). These sensory experiences can consist of senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and/or touch. When more than one of these senses has a contribution to the sensory experience, a multi-sensory brand experience can be spoken of (ibid.). According to Pine II & Gilmore (1998), the experience will be perceived as more memorable with each added sense that is engaged. Companies can use this concept of multi-sensory brand experience to differentiate themselves from the competition and position their brand in the customers' minds. This is in line with Schembri's (2009) view, who states that branding can be employed by companies to differentiate themselves from the competition and to create positive associations in the customer's mind.

Experience & (Brand) Meaning

When focusing on the relationship between the experience and (brand) meaning, it can be said that a customer's experience during and with a service enables the creation of a strong brand through the shaping of (brand) meaning (Berry, 2000). Holbrook & Hirschman (1982), who support the experiential view, state that products/services are mostly evaluated based on the symbolic meanings that they evoke during the experience. This is further emphasised by the fact that experiences are dependent on the value-in-use aspect of a product or service, as value and (brand) meanings are always created by *using* the product/service (Iglesias et al., 2013; Ind & Coates, 2013). Furthermore, experiences are subjective, interactive and context-specific (Akaka et al., 2014; Helkkula et al., 2012); in other words, no experience is equal to another, as value and (brand) meaning are created by making use of the product/service and by making sense of the experience. Andreini et al. (2018) affirm this and state that (brand) meanings are created in the experience through customers' engagement and contribution. Interestingly, even though experiences are shaped uniquely by the customer as they are subjective and context-dependent, it is still possible for collective meanings to emerge (Helkkula et al., 2012). This is the focus of the consumer culture theory (Akaka et al., 2014; Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and 'subcultures of consumption' research

(Schouten, Martin & McAlexander, 2007; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The latter will be discussed in more detail later.

Experience & Brand

A company's brand can be built by means of marketing, however the most effective tool to build a brand is the experiences of customers during and with the service (Berry, 2000). Furthermore, as argued by Schmitt (1999), a brand is a source for providing experiences that appeal to a customer's senses, emotions, intellect, lifestyles, and relationships. These experiences have the potential to lead to exceptional and memorable brand experiences which in turn can alter the brand associations. As stated before, the company proposes value to their customers in the form of a brand proposition (which is embedded in the interactions) and the customer, in turn, is the one who (co-)creates value by using the product/service and evaluating/making sense of the firm's value proposition (the experience; Akaka et al., 2014).

(Brand) Meaning

According to Batey (2006, p.102), brand meaning "refers to the semantic and symbolic features of the brand, the sum of the fundamental conscious and unconscious elements that compose the consumer's mental representation of the brand". This definition highlights that people do not perceive things, they perceive meanings (Krippendorff, 1989). Krippendorff defines meaning as "a cognitively constructed relationship, which selectively connects features of an object and features of its (real environment or imagined) context into a coherent unity" (1989, p.12). This means (Figure 4) that the designer creates an artifact which is seen as 'form': this result stems from sense-making by the designer (i.e., a professional). The artifact is seen in context as a meaning and the process of sense-making of this meaning by the user results in the 'acting on' the artifact. As an example, Krippendorff (1989) states that a car might be designed in such a way that it provides transportation, however the user might make sense of the meaning in a different way and perceive the car to be a symbol of status. These different interpretations can be explained by the fact that meanings are variant: people acquire those through learning, they can change over time, they depend on the person's imagination, and they depend on the context in which the process of sense making occurs (ibid.).

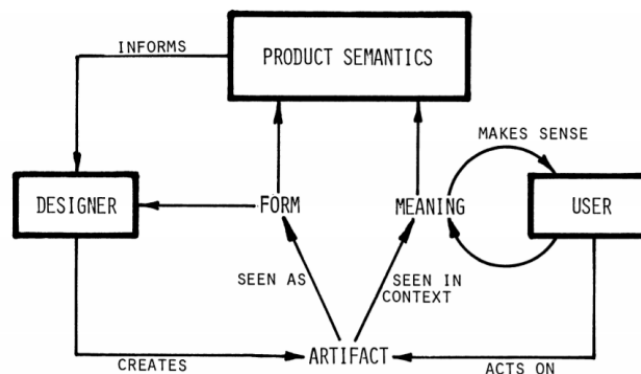


Figure 4: The Process of Making-Sense of Things
 Source: Krippendorff, 1989, p.15

This understanding of meaning by Krippendorff (1989) emphasizes that customers can evaluate their experience by making sense of meaning that is present in the context – or implicitly present in the interactions between customers and a company. In addition, meaning is embedded by the designer into the interaction and process of sense-making by users. The interaction customers have with the artifact thus enables the user to make sense of the meanings, which in turn enables them to evaluate their customer experience and form perceptions. This is also mentioned by Michel (2017), who states that customers make sense of a brand as they try to make it theirs. Flusser (1999) explains the emergence of meaning as follows:

If 'form' is the opposite of 'matter', then no design exists that could be called 'material': It is always in-forming. And if form is the 'How' of matter, and 'matter' the 'What' of form, then design is one of the methods of giving form to matter and making it appear as it does and not like something else. *Design, like all cultural expressions, illustrates that matter does not appear (is not apparent) except in so far as one in-forms it, and that, once in-formed, it starts to appear (become a phenomenon).* Thus, matter in design, as everywhere in culture, is the way in which forms appear. (p.26, emphasis added)

As mentioned before, according to Karjalainen & Snelders (2010) and Clatworthy (2012), brand meaning is created by means of three aspects: brand values, design values, and customer interpretation. In this creation of brand meaning, it is important to provide a synchronised connection between brand proposition and product/service design. As mentioned

before, this connection can be created by conducting ‘semantic transformation’. Both authors (ibid.) explain how semantic transformation enables the transformation of ‘qualitative brand descriptions’ into ‘value-based design features’; a transformation that enables the envisioned meanings to emerge. So, meanings are embedded as brand values are transformed into design features. However, this view does not take into consideration the fact that meaning is co-created by both the provider and the user.

Sherry (2005, p.40) states that the brand stores and proposes meaning. Combining this knowledge with the research of Krippendorff (1989), it can be understood that the brand proposition is a meaning that is communicated through the interactions between the brand offering and the customer. This sense-making of the meaning that occurs during the interaction enables the generation of experiences, which can be seen as the customer’s perception of the brand. This is in line with the view of various authors on co-creation of value (e.g., Andreini et al., 2018;), as well as Sherry (2005) who states that the brand requires a ‘call-and-response’ type of singing among all stakeholders. This view indicates that the brand is proposed by the company, and it is also something that is shaped by customers through interactions.

In a similar fashion, Iglesias et al. (2013) propose the ‘organic view of the brand’ (OVB), which they suggest challenges the traditional view of branding that states that managers shape the brand. The OVB instead addresses that brand meaning is a constant process of negotiation among stakeholders. This view takes into consideration the fact that brands are social processes which involve various stakeholders, and therefore their value is co-created by all the stakeholders (Iglesias et al., 2013; Merz et al., 2009). This phenomenon called ‘value co-creation’ indicates that a customer’s evaluation of an experience depends on collective meanings, previous interactions, expected interactions, and the context in which the value arises and is obtained (Akaka et al., 2014). In addition, the interactions between individuals enable the creation of brand meanings; this is not solely determined by the brand itself (Ind & Coates, 2013).

Ind and Coates (2013) take into consideration the fact that co-creation does not only take place in the context of creating ‘things’ and emphasise that it also takes place in the context of interpretation and making sense of meaning. While things are not always co-created, the authors (ibid.) state that meanings always arise through co-creation. Iglesias et al. (2013) acknowledge the importance of interactions and the overall brand experience in building brand value and establishing relationships and customer loyalty. Interestingly they also note that, if there is a fit between promised and delivered, stakeholders can still influence companies to change their offering, indicating the loss of control for organisations. In other words, co-creation changes the customer in an active player with the ability to create value (Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni & Tse, 2014). As Ind and Coates (2013; also Stach, 2018) describe, co-creation is more and more used as a term that explains the shift from viewing companies as creators of value to viewing customers as being participants in this process of meaning generation.

Michel (2017) uses a metaphor to better explain the difference/relationship between brand identity and brand meaning and the relationship the experience plays in this. For the authors (ibid.), the brand identity is the architecture of a house as the architect has designed it. If the house is not sold, the architecture and thus the brand identity will remain the same. If the house is sold, the owner will most likely try to make the house their own (through their experiences) and thus they will create brand meaning.

To create brand meaning, it is necessary to establish a brand image; this brand image outlines what characterises the brand and what the brand should signify in the customers’ minds (Keller, 2001). These ‘brand associations’ are mostly created through experiences; as Berry (2000) mentions, the most powerful tool in building a brand is the actual experience a customer has with a service. It is important for brand associations to be (a) strong, (b) favourable, and (c) unique – in exactly that order – if a company want to ensure brand equity creation (Keller, 2001). Kapferer (2008) holds a similar view on brand associations and the creation of brand equity. The author (ibid.) cites a quotation from the Marketing Science Institute (Leuthesser, 1988), which conveys that brand equity is the added value of a company, obtained through behaviours and brand associations in the customers’ and other actors’ minds, that it would not have excluding the brand name (Kapferer, 2008). Kapferer (2008) includes especially this definition as it not only highlights the importance of all channel members, but also the importance of the set of associations and behaviour they hold towards the brand. Yu and Yuan (2019, p.1237) define brand equity to comprise “customers’ subjective and intangible assessment of a brand over and above its material value” and to be established “through image and meaning activated by brand awareness, brand attitude and corporate ethics”. In line with these views, Alves Da Motta Filho (2017) expresses that brand equity depends on a customer’s ‘remembered brand experience’, which he defines as the collection of the customer’s perceptions of all its interactions with the brand.

Sherry (2005) proposes three sources of brand meaning:

- (a) Brand image, which are those characteristics of a company’s offering that are external and observable. This part of brand meaning is embedded in the brand by the designer.

- (b) Brand essences, which come to exist as customers engage with the company's offering, leading to the creation of meaning. This part of brand meaning is co-created by the customer.
- (c) Brandscape, which – depending on their relationships – groups brands together within their industries to create webs of associations.

Interestingly, the first source of brand meaning seems to be equal to brand identity (brand proposition); the second source of brand meaning seems to be equal to brand image as defined by most authors (as mentioned before in the sub-chapter 'brand'). However, these sources of brand meaning by Sherry (2005) nicely explain that brand meaning consists not only of the meanings that are created by the customer, but also of the brand meaning embedded by the brand (brand proposition). Furthermore, the author highlights that meanings arise when customers engage with the brand's offering, and thus through experiences.

(Brand) Meaning & Experience

So, as mentioned, meanings are not fixed; this is partially the case since meanings are (1) always dependent on the context in which they are formed, and (2) always co-created. These two facts show the importance of the experience in the creation of (brand) meaning, as it is created when the customer interacts with the company's offering and when the customer is thus able to make sense of meaning through evaluating the experience. This is in line with: Andreini et al. (2018) and Chang & Chieng (2006), who state that through experiences customers are able to engage in the formation of brand meaning; Berry (2000), who states that the main source of brand meaning is the experience; and Ind & Coates (2013) who state that brand meaning is created by all stakeholders through interactions. Ind & Coates further (2013, p.87) emphasise that this creation of brand meaning does not revolve around the "creation of things", rather it is about "interpretation and meaning making".

(Brand) Meaning & Brand

Meaning is embedded into interactions representing the brand proposition, and customers are able to make sense of a brand by making the brand theirs (Sherry, 2005; Michel, 2017). These views are further elaborated by Stach (2018), who states that brand meaning is traditionally defined as associations that are deliberately created by the brand, which the customer assigns to it. He emphasises the fact that brand meaning is a relational construct, which means that brand meaning exists solely in the customer's mind, who consequently can form associations and connect these to a brand.

An interesting stream of research, which nicely encompasses the relationship between brand meaning and the brand, is that on subcultures of consumption, which allow for collective meanings to emerge. As Akaka et al. (2014) explain: collective experiences, norms and meanings allow individuals to develop relationships. These relationships can be grouped together in 'subcultures of consumption', defined by Schouten & McAlexander (1995, p.43) as "a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity". Summarising their research on the Harley Davidson subcultures, the authors state that subcultures of consumption revolve around the sharing of values and the degree of commitment. Furthermore, all of those participating in the subculture (customers, but also marketers) negotiate together to establish collective meanings (Schouten et al., 2007).

Schouten et al. (2007) found that subcultures of consumption arise as customers find themselves able to identify with a brand and its values. This is further highlighted by Klabi (2020), who found that when self-image is congruent with brand image, the perceived quality of the brand is enhanced. And, it is even further underlined by Fitzsimons, Chartrand & Fitzsimons (2008), who state that customers perceive brands to be linked to certain personality traits and characteristics that humans possess, in particular they assess these brands based on the extent they are able to fulfil their own personal goals. Therefore, companies should fulfil personal goals of customers and thus have extensive knowledge of their customers' needs and preferences.

The most valuable take-away from the subcultures of consumption research is that it helps us understand that brands come alive through the collective negotiation of meaning by all stakeholders. As the fame of the Harley-Davidson bikers conveys us, brand meaning and consequently a brand, is partially created by those who engage with and make sense of it. A more recent and highly relevant example of this, are the #MeToo movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, that have, thanks to its supporters, encouraged many brands to re-evaluate their values and communications.

Brand, Experience, and (Brand) Meaning

Andreini et al. (2018) acknowledge the fact that brands cannot be seen as only being shaped by marketers, rather brands are established as interactions occur between the company and the customers, in which the customer actively shapes brand meaning. So, through experience and engagement with all stakeholders, customers are able to co-create brand meaning (ibid.). This has been mentioned before and provides a clear explanation how the three concepts work together to form the

brand experience, which will be further detailed in the following section. Figure 5 visualises the relations between these concepts and its outcomes to clarify the nature of the brand experience as gathered from the literature review.

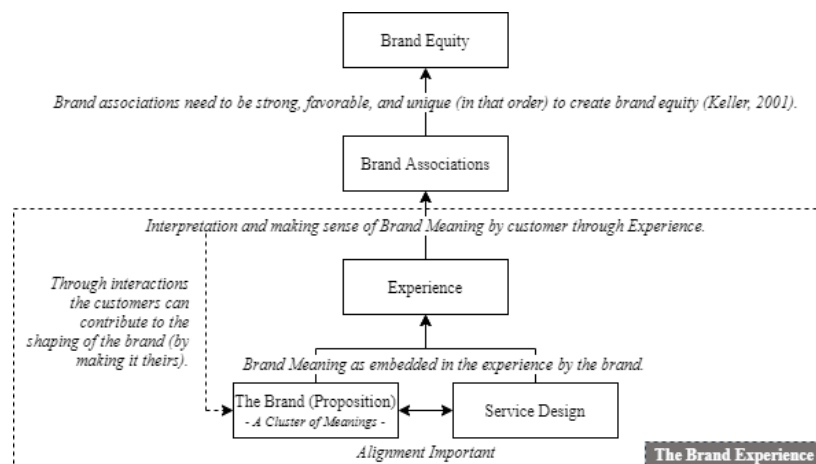


Figure 5: Relations Brand, (Brand) Meaning, Experience, and its Outcomes

A brand is a “cluster of meanings” (Batey, 2016, p.6) and these meanings are embedded as brand values are transformed into design features (Clatworthy, 2012; Karjalainen & Snelders, 2010; Stach, 2018). Alignment between brand values and service design is important as it enables the envisioned meanings to emerge (Clatworthy, 2012; Karjalainen & Snelders, 2010). Service design which is unaligned with brand values can thus cause undesired meanings to emerge; this relationship is visualised by the connecting arrow between ‘the brand (proposition)’ and ‘service design’.

A company proposes value to customers in the form of a brand offering (or the embodiment of the brand proposition in the interactions through service design). Customers, however, are the ones who are able to (co-)create value by using the product/service and evaluating/making sense of the value proposition of the firm (or the experience; Andreini et al., 2018; Akaka et al., 2014; Berry, 2000; Chang & Chieng, 2006; Ind & Coates, 2013). This indicates that value and brand meaning can only be created as customers use the product/service (Iglesias et al., 2013; Ind & Coates, 2013). And, as customers interact with and evaluate their experience with a company, brand meaning is created and shaped, which is used by the customer to form associations in their minds and connect these to the brand (Batey, 2016; Stach, 2018). This further explains that a brand consists of perceptions and associations that exists and change in the customers’ minds (Batey, 2016; Fournier, 1998). It is important for these associations to be (a) strong, (b) favourable, and (c) unique – in exactly that order – if a company want to ensure brand equity creation (Keller, 2001). Brand equity is the added value of a company (obtained through behaviours and brand associations in the customers’ and other actors’ minds), that it would not have excluding the brand name (Kapferer, 2008).

The figure also shows a link from the sense-making of brand meaning to the brand (proposition); not only does a customer’s evaluation of a firm’s offering change brand meaning, it also works the other way around. A firm’s brand can be altered as customers interact with the firm and shape the brand in such a way to make it theirs (co-creation; Akaka et al., 2014; Stach, 2018). Furthermore, with each interaction and evaluation of experience, the cluster of meanings that the brand consists of can take on a different shape (Batey, 2016). This highlights the influence of experience in the shaping of a brand. In the chapter ‘findings and discussion, Figure 5 will be elaborated and evaluated based on the empirical findings.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative research design to better understand brand experience in an empirical setting. Qualitative research helps to form an understanding of “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their world, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.6). Qualitative research especially fits the objective of this research, as it attempts to uncover the (brand) meaning that emerges in the experience, and how customers evaluate their experience in relation to the brand. This design is also called a ‘phenomenology’, which is defined by Merriam & Tisdell (2016, p.25-26) as having “a focus on the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness”.

The research conducted, includes an analysis of textual data, visual data, and customer reviews. Brand identity was firstly explored, followed by brand image. Brand identity, as discussed before, is the “set of unique brand associations” that a company wishes to create and uphold, and the symbols that allows for customers to recognise the brand (Black & Veloutsou, 2017, p.6). By means of textual and visual data, brand identity was analysed, and brand propositions were

recognised. The visual data was analysed by means of a semiotic analysis proposed by Penn (2011). For Penn (2011, p.3), “semiology provides the analyst with a conceptual toolkit for approaching sign systems systematically in order to discover how they produce meaning”. This approach of exploring brand identity allowed for the extraction of brand propositions through the airlines’ advertisements (Harvey & Evans, 2001).

Brand image, as discussed before, outlines what characterises the brand and what the brand should signify in the customers’ minds (Keller, 2001). By means of the analysis of customer reviews, brand image was analysed, and brand perceptions were recognised. The analysis of customer reviews is especially relevant for the objective of this research, as “the construct of brand experience has become a major area of research that forms, maintains, and describes the relationship between brands and consumers” (Oh, Connerton & Kim, 2019, p.2); and, in the customer reviews, consumers evaluate their experience with the brand. Furthermore, these customer reviews allow for the analysis of (brand) meaning emergence. Together, these approaches address a research gap that Karjalainen and Snelders proposed in 2010, as they state that it would be valuable to investigate the relationships that occur between the meanings that companies embed in their products by means of design, and the meanings that customers attribute to the products based on said design.

Research Object

In this research, the focus has been placed on brands in the airline industry. As competition is increasingly getting more tough and functional aspects of products are becoming more homogeneous, it is important for brands to differentiate themselves through their symbolic aspects (Berry, 2000; Coelho, Bairrada & De Matos Coelho, 2020). The airline industry consists of brands that offer similar services (Endrizalová, Novák, Němec & Szabo, 2018) and thus must rely on the quality of their service and the way they propose themselves in order to differentiate themselves. The airlines have been purposefully selected to gain a complete overview of the brand experience for various segments, and range from low-cost (Ryanair, easyJet) to middle-class (KLM) to more luxurious (Virgin Atlantic, British Airways). Each of these airlines provide similar services but have quite different brand propositions; making comparisons in absolute terms solely would thus not suffice. This selection of a range of airlines allows for the analysis of whether it is possible for airlines (with homogeneous offerings) to differentiate themselves based on their brand. In other words, it allows for investigating whether brand experiences are evaluated based on (brand) meanings as opposed to along a good/bad spectrum.

Data Collection

This research relies on two categories of data sources: official data and external data. The former consists of official company documents and brand communications (such as brand logo, commercials, advertisements, etc.) and have been gathered via the Internet from official company channels (website, yearly reports, YouTube, Instagram) and unofficial YouTube channels and websites that have uploaded airline commercials and advertisements. The latter consists of public customer reviews, which have been collected and filtered by a natural language processing expert based on the brand proposition that emerged through analysis of the official data. Filtering took place as the average customer review is of poor quality (e.g. short, insubstantial, unthoughtful), and the research approach used in this thesis calls for well thought-out, comprehensive, detailed customer reviews. The dataset is thus biased, as it specifically includes only those reviews that include one or more words related to the established brand propositions (see Appendix 2 for the filters used for each airline). However, this filtering was done on purpose as it suits the nature of this research; as Taleb (2010) describes in his ‘black swan theory’, you only need to sight one black swan in order to find support for the fact that not all swans are white. And thus, this research only needs to find one customer whose review indicates that he/she perceived the brand as meanings to find support for the fact that a brand *can* be perceived as meanings.

Process

As mentioned, this research analyses both brand identity and brand image and therefore the research is divided into two phases that will, from now on, be referred to as phase one (brand identity) and phase two (brand image).

Phase one of the research includes the analysis of the airlines’ official data. This data was gathered via the companies’ official web sites, yearly reports, social media channels, and unofficial channels. The official documents such as company web sites and yearly reports include textual data, and communications such as advertisements mostly include visual data. The analysis of the textual data and the visual data was therefore conducted in a manner that related to their type. Firstly, textual data was gathered and collected into one document per airline. Secondly, the textual data was coded in a way that revealed themes and sub-categories. Thirdly, visual data was gathered and analysed by means of semiotic analysis (see Appendix 3). Fourthly, the semiotic analysis results were then merged with the outcomes of the textual data (see Appendix 4). Lastly, the most substantial categories were then clustered in such a way that uncovered various layers of propositions.

These steps were undertaken in collaboration with a branding expert to increase the reliability of the data. The resulting clusters per airline can be found in Appendix 5.

Phase two included the analysis of the customer reviews (see Appendix 6 for the customer reviews). The customer reviews were collected and filtered by a natural language processing expert based on the brand propositions/clusters found in phase one (see Appendix 5). A number of 50 positive reviews per airline remained for analysis. The reviews were then analysed by means of a deductive and inductive process making use of the qualitative data analysis software tool ATLAS.ti. Firstly, the reviews were thoroughly studied by the researcher to get familiarised with the data. Secondly, the reviews were analysed and coded using an open and thematic approach based on the literature regarding the research sub-questions (while taking the main research question into consideration); this followed both a deductive (a priori) and inductive (emergent) approach (e.g., Blair, 2015; Elliot, 2018; Vaughn & Turner, 2015). This was done in order to better understand what the reviewers meant with their reviews; to see whether brand meanings emerged from their reviews (and thus their experience); and to see if the reviewers' experiences were evaluated in such a way that showed support for the fact that the brand experience is perceived as meanings. Thirdly, the reviews were analysed and coded thematically according to the clustering that was established in phase one; this followed a deductive (a priori) approach (e.g., Elliot, 2018; Vaughn & Turner, 2015). This was done to form an understanding of the extent to which the brand proposition manifested in the reviews. The first part of this customer review analysis (based on the literature regarding the sub-questions) provided support for the fact that brands seemed to be implicitly perceived in the experience as meanings. This gave rise to further analysis of the reviews (based on the brand propositions) and the emergence of (brand) meaning in the experience, in order to uncover whether brands are able to differentiate themselves based on their brand propositions (the embodiment in the experience), and whether brand experiences are evaluated based on (brand) meanings instead of along a good/bad spectrum.

This approach to qualitative research creates a research which looks at brand experience from three different perspectives (relationships) and thus provides a more comprehensive view of the brand experience and its nature. See Figure 6 for an overview of the process.

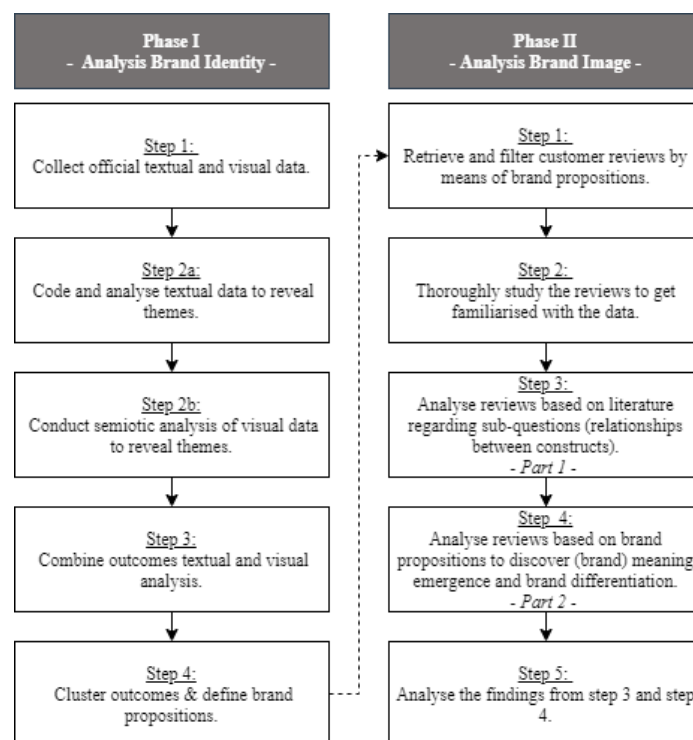


Figure 6: An Overview of the Two Phases of Analysis

4. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This chapter includes a description of the data extracted in phase one and two and provides support for the discussion of the findings of this research in the subsequent chapter 'findings and discussion'.

Phase I

Van den Bosch, Jong and Elving (2005, p.108) explore the relationship that occurs between ‘corporate visual identity’ (CVI) and reputation, and state that CVI consists of those elements (graphics and symbols) that portray an organisation’s essence. It is important to carefully and consistently match an organisation’s essence (e.g., history, culture, identity, vision) with its visual identity (logo, colours, slogan, etc.), communications, and behaviour (Van den Bosch et al., 2005; Van Riel & Van den Ban, 2001). Not only does this provide customers with a clearer idea of what the organisation stands for and promises, but it also provides organisations with the opportunity to differentiate itself from its competition (Van den Bosch et al., 2005).

Establishing a sound corporate identity, as a way to assure differentiation from competition, is especially important in the airline industry as the services offered are highly similar (Endrizalová et al., 2018); all airlines offer essentially the same service, namely flying passengers to their destination; bringing them from A to B. What differentiates those airlines, is under which circumstances they do so and how they portray themselves.

Ryanair

Founded in 1985, Ryanair was the first airline in Europe to adopt a ‘low fares’ business model (Ryanair, n.d.-a). Over the past decades, Ryanair has continuously altered its operations in order to offer their customers the lowest fares possible. Consequently, this cost leadership strategy is communicated to its customers to illustrate that flying with Ryanair includes *low costs* (e.g., low fares). These low costs are mainly made possible by their *efficiency*, both in terms of service (customers’ perspective) and operations (company’s perspective). Interestingly, especially when comparing them to other airlines, Ryanair’s view of service quality is focused on efficiency and functionality, as opposed to, for example, friendliness (e.g., easyJet). Besides the low fares that Ryanair offers due to their efficiency, they also proudly communicate to its customers their *wide choice* in offering. In fact, Ryanair offers flights to “200 destinations in 40 countries” (Ryanair, n.d.-b) and continuously expands their list of connected airports. Furthermore, in line with this wide choice in offering, Ryanair also offers *supplementary services* to their customers, such as hotel arrangements, car hiring, and travel insurance. Each of these propositions is further explained next.

Low Costs: Ever since Ryanair started operating in 1985, their main strategy has been to offer low fares. By adopting a cost leadership and taking (extreme) measures to further lower costs and in the process lower fares, Ryanair has become the first and largest low fares airline in Europe offering the lowest rates (Ryanair, n.d.-a). To make the customer aware of Ryanair’s confidence about offering the lowest fares, they have set up a price guarantee scheme in which customers will be paid “double the difference in the form of Travel Credit” if they can find their flight cheaper within three hours of booking (Ryanair, n.d.-c; Ryanair, 2019a). Ryanair’s slogans over the years have backed up their drive to offer the lowest fares possible (e.g., “Low Fares. Made Simple.”, Ryanair, 2016; and “More Choice. Lower Fares. Great Care.”, Ryanair, 2019b).

Efficiency: As mentioned, Ryanair can keep their costs low due to their efficiency; mainly their operational efficiency. This is communicated by Ryanair through stating their percentage of on-time flights, high load factors, but also their efforts to improve environmental efficiency. Ryanair is the number one airline in Europe in terms of carbon efficiency due to their young aircraft fleet, high load factor, and fuel-efficient engines (Ryanair, n.d.-d). Ryanair’s service efficiency benefits their customers more directly in terms of ensuring that the experience is smooth, simple, and quick. One of Ryanair’s campaign slogans is as follows: “Satisflying from Ryanair”. This slogan in combination with the commercial (Preece, 2017) indicates the variety of ways flying with Ryanair becomes easier, such as having a second cabin bag allowed and providing an electronic boarding pass that can be used on a mobile phone.

Wide Choice: Ryanair offers flights to more than 40 countries and over 200 destinations, and in their communications, they often refer to their wide offering. In their commercial celebrating Ryanair’s 30th anniversary (Unravel Travel TV, 2015), Ryanair highlights where they came from (only offering flights to one destination) and where they are now (offering flights to 190 destinations – at the time of launching the commercial). With this commercial, they focus on the wide choice they have managed to create and now offer their customers.

Supplementary Services: The last aspect of the proposition that emerged is the supplementary services that Ryanair offers their customers. This includes services such as car hiring, travel insurance, and their Ryanair Rooms website/app. These services are meant to make the experience for customers more holistic and thus easier to arrange. This provides even more support for the fact that Ryanair tries to satisfy customers by providing a view on service quality that is directed at efficiency.

easyJet

Colours and designs on an airlines' livery are among the most visible and recognisable aspects that are part of an airline's brand identity (Budd, 2012). If anyone were to be asked which airline they associate with the colour orange, easyJet would most likely be one of the first to come to mind. easyJet was founded in 1995 with the intention to provide flights in Europe at low fares (easyJet plc., n.d.-a). Since then, their key priorities include safety and responsibility, being on their customers' side, being in it together, always being efficient, and always thinking about the future. All of this is delivered "from the heart, with passion, ensuring our orange spirit shines through in every thing we do" (easyJet plc., n.d.-b). These goals shine through in their communications. easyJet promises to be *affordable*; just as Ryanair, their low fares are mainly offered by means of low costs achieved through efficiency. However, easyJet clearly phrases themselves as being affordable and thus available for many people, whereas Ryanair focuses more on their low costs and efficiency. Furthermore, easyJet also states that they offer a wide *variety* in their offering in terms of destinations and schedule. Next to this, easyJet puts emphasis on the importance of offering their customers an *enjoyable* experience. This is communicated in terms of their friendliness, their passion, and the fact that a flight should be relaxing for the customer. Lastly, and perhaps most important if you take into consideration the brand's name, easyJet promises to offer their customers an *easy* experience in terms of it being seamless, efficient, and hassle-free. Each of these propositions is further explained next.

Affordable: As easyJet was founded, their first advertising campaign states that easyJet was "making flying as affordable as a pair of jeans – 29 pounds one way" (easyJet plc., n.d.-a). This indicates that easyJet is passionate to make air travel affordable and available for everyone. They are able to achieve these affordable prices by making use of their cost advantage (easyJet plc., n.d.-c) and their efficiency. Furthermore, they state that they will continuously work on finding ways to better their customer experience and maintain their affordability and desirability (easyJet plc., n.d.-b). The affordability of the tickets throughout their entire existence is shown in their commercial celebrating 20 years of easyJet (Karakter Casting, 2016), which states: "How 20 years have flown. Europe still from £29.99." This indicates that easyJet has always offered low fares.

Variety: easyJet acknowledges that customers do not only want beneficial fares, they also want to fly from and to their preferred airports (easyJet plc., n.d.-d). Therefore, they offer a wide variety of destinations and flight frequency, bringing passengers to 156 airports via 979 routes in 33 countries (easyJet plc., n.d.-e). This variety is further highlighted in their commercials, which, for example, show that easyJet provides holidays for everyone and to many places, whether you love going to the beach, skiing, or strolling through a city (Home Cinema Adverts, 2016).

Enjoyable: easyJet aims to connect Europe in a seamless manner while delivering the "warmest welcome in the sky" and making travel enjoyable for both leisure-passengers and business-passengers (easyJet plc., 2019). This goal of making travel enjoyable includes offering friendliness, being passionate and providing the customer with a relaxing experience. The latter is displayed in a commercial (easyJet, 2018) in which easyJet shows of how they provide a relaxing experience during travelling which ultimately optimises the customers' whole holiday experience. This enjoyment of the experience is shown in their commercial "Why Not" (Home Cinema Adverts, 2016), which includes a woman enjoying several holiday activities, such as going to beach, skiing, walking across a market, but it also include some fun visuals such as a woman wakeboarding off of a plane.

Easy: Lastly, as already mentioned, easyJet aims to connect Europe in a seamless manner. This 'seamlessness' is part of their proposition of providing customers an easy experience. Seamlessness includes transport on the ground, direct flights, and the offering of all-inclusive holidays. Another aspect that is supposed to make the experience easier for customers is the fact that easyJet displays themselves as offering hassle-free services to customers. This includes, for instance, self-service check-in and mobile boarding passes. Furthermore, an easy experience would not be possible without efficiency. easyJet promises customers simple and quick processes within their experience, such as the aforementioned self-service check-in, and a mobile app that simplifies and quickens the experience.

KLM

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines first started operating on October 7th, 1919; the main principle being that their people are the key to their brand (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, n.d.-a). KLM is convinced that they "can make the difference by consistently offering [their] customers a memorable experience" (ibid.). Their ambition to deliver *memorable* experiences to their customers stems from their aspirations to evolve and make dreams turn into reality. From their first day of operating to the present-day, KLM has made 100 years of memories together with their customers (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2019a; KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2019b). KLM's ambition together with its aim to look towards the future form the basis of their *relentlessness*, apparent as they state to be "Proud of its history, committed to its future!" (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2019b). This statement also shows the way they embrace their *heritage*; as also visible in their communications, which talk about their evolution, their nationality, and their pride in all their achievements. However, KLM does not only

focus on where they came from, they are also very forward-looking in terms of technological advancements. This eye on the future also comes with a sense of responsibility, and KLM is aware of their environmental, economic, and social impact and continuously tries to develop new sustainable ways to improve this (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, n.d.-b). This *sustainable* viewpoint is necessary in the present-day, but also as KLM proposes to offer various *options* to their customers in terms of destinations and improvements in accessibility. A healthy balance is needed to be able to provide accessible air travel while reducing environmental, economic, and social impact. Each of these propositions is further explained next.

Memorable: KLM is aware of their job extending far beyond bringing customers from A to B and promise their customers that KLM is there for them (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2016). This is visible in their commercial ‘Moving Your World’ and shows the impact KLM can have on the customer and their journey. Furthermore, their commercials include various generations (of the same family) working at KLM throughout the years and the pride they have in their job. Encompassing this is their slogan “To More Memories Together”, which highlights the memorability that KLM has brought to many people in the past and is planning to create in the future (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2019a).

Relentless: KLM states that ambition is part of their DNA (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, n.d.-a). This is, for example, visible in their pioneering activities and continuous drive to do better. Furthermore, KLM’s commercial ‘To More Memories Together’, shows of the ambition of several employees who strive to follow in the footsteps of their parents/grandparents and show of their determination to work for KLM (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2019a). In addition to this and also in line with this commercial, KLM is forward-looking, noticeable in the fact that KLM often looks back at operating in the aviation industry for over a century, while at the same time looking forward and preparing for the next 100 years (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2019b).

Heritage: As stated, KLM embraces their heritage and clearly communicates this to their customers. A prime example of this, are the various mentions of their 100th anniversary celebration and achievements over the past 100 years. As KLM states themselves: “Proud of its history, committed to its future!” (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2019b). Furthermore, as their name and logo illustrate, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines originates from The Netherlands and is a royal airline. Overall, KLM is vital to the Dutch economy, which is highlighted in their offering of a characteristic Dutch Delftware miniature house to those passengers flying World Business Class. Each of these miniature houses is a replica of a well-known Dutch building, and every year – to celebrate their birthday – a new one is added (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, n.d.-c).

Sustainable: KLM is committed to its future and aware of the responsibilities they have in making this future sustainable: “As one of the bigger players in the aviation industry, KLM feels a strong responsibility to reduce its carbon footprint in as many ways as possible” (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2018). KLM does not issue paper tickets anymore, uses biofuel on all flights, and focuses on fleet renewal, to name a few of their efforts (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2018; KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, n.d.-b). Their sustainability is further shown in an advertisement that highlights their use of biofuel and their aim to reduce CO2 emission, highlighted by their statement: “To make the earth cleaner, we thought about the sky” (Ads of the World, 2020). This statement underlines the fact that KLM knows their responsibility and role in bettering the future.

(Multiple) Options: KLM, together with their partners in the SkyTeam Alliance, offers flights to over 1,000 destinations in over 150 countries (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, n.d.-a). One of their main aims with this wide availability of flights is to make flying accessible for as many people as possible; as also seen in the variety of classes they offer (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, n.d.-b). KLM’s commercials also show this offering of multiple options, because no matter what your destination is, no matter what your plans are, KLM will make the service memorable for everyone; “we may come from a small country, but we take you to more places than you might think” (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2016).

British Airways

British Airways has a very rich history. After several forerunners, British Airways was established in 1924 under the name ‘Imperial Airways’, and since 1974, after a merger, the airline is operating under the name we nowadays know (British Airways, n.d.-a). British Airways states that, “customers love us when we’re true to who we are” and “they come to us for a unique British Airways service, instilled with the style and charm our nation’s known for in every corner of the globe” (British Airways, n.d.-b). This statement immediately highlights the first of British Airways’ brand propositions, namely their *Britishness*. British Airways, as it names already gives away, is a British Airline which is strongly associated with Great Britain and British values. They happily embrace this Britishness as well as their heritage. This *heritage*, which can be sub-divided into their history and their global mindset, is something that is at the heart of British Airways’ values and their operations. British Airways has been operating, while tracing back “its origins (...) to the birth of civil aviation, the pioneering days following World War I” (British Airways, n.d.-a). These pioneering activities can be traced back to their days of formation all the way to the present-day. British Airways communicates to be quite *high-tech* in its innovations,

which include mostly technological advancements, such as electronic reservation units, electronic ticketing, and state-of-the-art systems to provide even better entertainment on board (British Airways, n.d.-c; British Airways, n.d.-d). Improvements on the entertainment system also are part of another brand proposition of British Airways, namely their provision of *comfort*. Besides top-notch entertainment, this also includes comfortable seats with plenty of leg room and the ability to turn into a flatbed (British Airways, n.d.-d). Furthermore, British Airways is motivated to provide their customers an experience filled with *refinement*, in the form of high-quality catering, pyjamas and sleep masks for those traveling in Club World, and Twinings English Breakfast Tea (British Airways, n.d.-e; British Airways, n.d.-f). Lastly, British Airways proposes to be *benevolent*. This benevolence shines through in their compassion (e.g., a charity partnership with Comic Relief and sponsor of Red Nose Day) and their tolerance (e.g., flexibility and helpfulness) (British Airways, n.d.-e; British Airways, n.d.-g). Each of these propositions is further explained next.

British(ness): In British Airways' century of existence, many milestones have been celebrated together with members of the British Royal family; this is only one example of the many ways in which British Airways shows the pride they take in their country of origin. Smaller tokens of appreciation are their offerings of Twinings English Breakfast, Fish and Chips, and afternoon tea scones (British Airways, n.d.-g; British Airways, n.d.-h). This Britishness is also present in their logo (Union Jack) and their commercials (often including British celebrities). Examples of such commercials are their 'Made in Britain' campaign in which British Airways has various well-known Brits state things they love about Great Britain (The Star Ads, 2019) and their 'Experience Britain' campaign in which each part of an airplane is represented by typical British landmarks and foods (Ads of the World, 2013).

Heritage: British Airways' commercial and accompanying slogan "To Fly. To Serve" shows the pride British Airways takes in their past and their origin by showing operations in their forming years (aviators in the war) up to and including their operations nowadays (pilots flying passengers; British Airways, 2016a). Furthermore, British Airways has launched various campaigns aimed towards certain countries indicating their global mindset (e.g., British Airways, 2014a [Australia]; British Airways, 2016b [India]).

Comfort: Discussing their airport hotels, British Airways states that travelling should not be exhausting (British Airways, n.d.-i). And, in their commercial introducing their flat beds, British Airways shows they made it possible to fly from New York to London in the most comfortable way, including a good night's sleep (The Hall of Advertising, 2013).

Benevolent: British Airways partnership with UK charity Comic Relief called 'Flying Start' aims to support young people from disadvantaged communities in reaching their full potential (British Airways, n.d.-j). Emphasised by their very special humorous on-board safety video, British Airways brings awareness to this cause in hopes of raising more money for children in need (British Airways, 2017). Furthermore, in their commercial '#fuelledbylove' (British Airways, 2016b), British Airways shows to be operating out of love in hopes of bringing families together and creating unity. This commercial also shows the kindness and helpfulness of British Airways' staff.

High-Tech: British Airways is an innovative airline with a focus on high-tech advancements to continuously improve their performance in terms of customer experience and sustainability. A commercial in partnership with Oculus and their VR glasses shows how British Airways can turn dreams into reality (British Airways, 2014b). In addition, this shows how technologically advanced and how open to technology British Airways is.

Refinement: "Designer pyjamas? Check. Finest English fizz? Check. Quintessential British service? Check. Dreamy 400-thread-count bedding? Check" (British Airways, n.d.-f). Simply put, British Airways provides a service filled with refinement and special details. This is also visible in a series of advertisements, which state that British Airways (1) employs wine experts, who have compared thousands of wines in order to see whether the taste in the air is as good as on the ground; (2) takes cheese tasting as serious as engine testing; (3) has found a baker making limited batches of bread which stay incredibly fresh high up in the air; and (4) has employed the most renowned chefs in order to design menus that taste immaculate in the sky (Clark, 2012).

Virgin Atlantic

In 1970, Sir Richard Branson started Virgin as a "mail order record retailer" under the name Virgin Records (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.-a). Virgin has since then grown into the Virgin Group, a holding company owning a multitude of ventures. One of those ventures, Virgin Atlantic, was founded on June 22nd, 1984 after Sir Richard Branson thought it was time for a new airline to shake things up and make "air travel exciting, stylish and enjoyable again" (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.-b). One of their main propositions is therefore to be *entertaining*, observable in their in-flight entertainment, and cheeky communications. Next to this, Virgin Atlantic oozes *extravagance*, visible in their outgoing personality through founder Richard Branson. Both of these propositions are also communicated through Virgin Atlantic's staff, which is humorous, and charismatic and wears bright red uniforms, characterising Virgin Atlantic's "red hot attitude" that is also visible in their logo and exterior (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.-c; Virgin Atlantic, n.d.-d). The charisma of the staff helps to highlight Virgin

Atlantic's *democratic* and *welcoming* sides. Virgin Atlantic provides a certain feeling of family both towards their employees and their passengers; all while ensuring an inclusive environment, accepting everyone as they are, and regarding everyone as equal (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.-e). Lastly, Virgin Atlantic's pioneering activities, and the fact that they are a (self-proclaimed) special airline summarise their *subversiveness* (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.-f). Each of these propositions is further explained next.

Extravagant: Virgin Atlantic's campaign 'Depart the Everyday' expresses the offering of an experience which allows people to escape from their normal, ordinary lives. In other words, Virgin Atlantic provides their passengers with the opportunity to experience the extraordinary (Virgin Atlantic, 2018). They state to be cheeky, over the top, and energetic, which partially stems from and is communicated through founder and chairman Sir Richard Branson, who "did anything to get attention for his businesses, including hot air ballooning, abseiling down Manhattan high rises or kissing Spice Girls (n.d.-c). As Kapferer (2008) states, brand identity will always be associated with the founder's identity, and Virgin Atlantic's brand identity still possesses a lot of Richard Branson's.

Entertaining: Ever since their date of founding, Virgin Atlantic has continuously been searching for new and fun ways to make the experience even more enjoyable (n.d.-c). This is communicated through their commercials with a cheek-in-tongue manner, such as ice cream coming out of air vents and dancing flight attendants (Virgin Atlantic, 2018; Advertising Loves Music, 2010). Furthermore, it is also visible in their campaign 'Depart the Everyday', which shows various types of passengers conducting various fun activities (Nerys Hoey Design, n.d.).

Democratic: On their job vacancy website, Virgin Atlantic states that their "aim is to create a motivated, resilient and vibrant workplace where our people are valued, listened to and supported (...) feel good about themselves, irrespective of their background, gender, race, beliefs, physical ability or who they choose to love" (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.-g). This aim is represented in their communications as their commercials include a variety of different types of passengers and employees (in terms of race, age, professions, sexual preferences, etc.; Nerys Hoey Design, n.d.; Virgin Atlantic, 2018).

Welcoming: Virgin Atlantic is a very sociable airline which employees are warm and welcoming to all passengers. This is visible in their commercials, as they show pilots and flight attendants welcoming passengers on the plane and serving them with a wide smile (e.g., Virgin Atlantic, 2018).

Subversive: "Your airline's either got it or it hasn't", one of Virgin Atlantic's campaign slogans, which aims to communicate their distinctiveness (Advertising Loves Music, 2010). Furthermore, their promise to deliver a special experience shows how Virgin Atlantic has a subversive character with the motivation to innovative and disrupt the industry; as also visible in their goal to shake up the airline industry (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.-b).

Phase II

The analysis of the customer reviews is divided into two parts: (1) analysis of the reviews based on the literature gathered and the research questions asked; and (2) analysis of the reviews according to the findings in phase one (brand propositions).

Part one of the analysis resulted in various general findings related to the relations (between brand, experience, and (brand) meaning) discussed in the theoretical framework and findings that emerged from the data. These findings can be found in Appendix 7 and include information on previous experience, airline reputation, exceeding customer expectations, meeting customer expectations, memorability of the experience, respect provided, helpfulness of the staff, characteristics, stimulation of the senses, and competitors comparisons. A summary of this appendix can be found in Table 1.

Among others, the analysis showed that customers very often mention:

- (a) Their previous experience with an airline (e.g., "Ryanair always serve me well"; "As always KLM gives you the royal treatment");
- (b) The memorability of their experience (e.g., "[a bottle of champagne and a birthday card] made our little trip away so nice and memorable [KLM]"; "Captain invited children onto flight deck whilst on ground [British Airways]"; "The cabin crew were brilliant and made the flight a very memorable one [Virgin Atlantic]");
- (c) The amount of help the staff provided (e.g., "I appreciated the care on this difficult trip [easyJet]"; "They got us on the next flight and really took care of us [after a missed flight with KLM by the customer's own doing]").

Interestingly, it became clear that customers do not explicitly seem to talk about their experience in relation to the brand proposition. However, customers do implicitly remark, those characteristics that are highlighted by an airline (e.g., "You get what you pay for [Ryanair]"; "The best of the budget airlines [easyJet]"), which shows how the airlines are able to differentiate themselves based on these characteristics (the embodiment of the brand propositions in the experience). Uncovering whether the brand propositions seemed to be perceived by customers (as meanings) therefore became the focus of part two of the customer review analysis.

Table 1: Findings Phase Two (Based on the Literature and Sub-Questions)

Findings Phase Two (Based on the Literature and Sub-Questions)	
Previous Experience	A customers' previous experience with the airline seems to shape their brand meaning and thus their perceptions about the current experience.
Reputation	A customer's knowledge of an airline's reputation (other reviews, WOM, news articles, etc. - can be both positive and negative) causes customers to start their experience with predisposed perceptions (brand meanings) that could be altered depending on the quality of the experience and whether this is in line with the reputation (expectations) or not.
Experience Exceeded Expectations	Customers' expectations can be shaped by the aforementioned (previous experience, reputation), but also by general airline expectations and/or brand proposition). In the case of the reviews analysed it seems that most expectations are based on previous experience and reputation, however it is difficult to find out whether to some degree this could be based upon brand proposition as this is not explicitly mentioned.
Experience Aligned with Expectations	If a brand delivers the service they propose, the customer will most likely have a positive experience as this means they got what they expected. This will be stored in the mind as positive brand meanings.
Memorability	A memorable experience with an airline, which can be described as special, meaningful, etc. has the ability to make customers form more positive associations in their mind regarding the airline.
Respect	If a customer is treated like an actual customer as opposed to just a number, he/she will find the experience to be more personal, allowing the shaping of positive associations in the mind.
Helpful	If an airline is helpful (i.e., when issues occur or requests are made) the customer will have more fond feelings towards the airline as he/she usually greatly appreciates this. This allows for the shaping of positive associations in the mind.
Characteristics	In case an airline highlights certain characteristics in their proposition, this is something that is remarked by many customers as they are able to link those characteristics to the airline and with these links make sense of the experience and the brand. This shows how the airlines are able to differentiate themselves based on these characteristics (embodiment of the brand propositions in the experience).
Stimulating Senses	Customers do not perceive things, but rather meanings when it comes to evaluating their experience. Research states that these aspects of the offering are aimed at stimulating consumers' senses. The data did not show support the stimulating of senses.
Comparison Competitors	In evaluating their experience they tend to compare it to experiences they have had with other airlines. These comparisons uncover those aspects that differentiate the evaluated airline.

Note: For more a more elaborate version (including results per airline and quotations/examples), see Appendix 7

Part two of the analysis resulted in five tables (see Appendix 8), one for each airline, including the extent to which the brand propositions seem to be perceived by customers. A summary of this appendix can be found in Table 2. The analysis of the data showed that customers mostly perceive Ryanair as a brand that provides low costs and efficiency. Examples of reviews that perceived these meanings are: "Offering cheap air travel"; "You get what you pay for", "Smooth", and "Very punctual". easyJet is mostly perceived by customers as a brand that provides easiness and enjoyableness, visible in the reviews: "Very smooth transition through all sections of the airport", "Simple procedures"; "Straightforward", "Lovely, smiley cabin crew"; "Humour, a smile and approachable", and "Easiest of flights". Customers perceived KLM as a brand that provides memorability and cherishes/portrays their nationality. These propositions and the meanings they evoked were visible in the reviews: "She made our flight an unforgettable experience"; "The crew really made it into a wonderful adventure"; "Precision of the Dutch crew!"; "Love the service and the Dutch mentality!", and "You even get a little Delft pottery Dutch house as a souvenir". British Airways seemed to be perceived by customers as a brand that provides benevolence and comfort. Customer reviews showed the following meanings: "ALL the cabin crew were most helpful", "All staff we encountered were considerate, attentive and friendly", and "Had a most comfortable sleep for around 8 hours, the beds and bedding are excellent". And finally, Virgin Atlantic's customers perceived the airline as a brand that provides extravagance, visible in their reviews: "A bar with bar stools", "In short, all the trappings associated with luxury", and "The Heathrow lounge is definitely an experience". Extravagance is one of the strongest meanings associated with Virgin Atlantic, however the brand is perceived in terms of *all* its propositions. The other airlines, however, had some clear outliers in terms of propositions that did not contribute and that did not evoke any/few meanings. The findings in relation to this data will be discussed in the following chapter.

Furthermore, even though the goal of this research is not to measure alignment, it is still interesting to compare the various airlines and see if there are any major differences in the extent they succeed in differentiating their brand in terms of their brand proposition and see which airlines elicit the strongest brand associations. So, this will also be discussed in the following chapter.

Table 2: Findings Phase Two (Based on the Brand Propositions)

Findings Phase Two (Based on the Brand Propositions)	
<u>Ryanair</u>	<p>From the analysis performed in this research, it can be concluded that customers mostly perceive Ryanair as a brand that provides a service of low costs and filled with efficiency. The proposition that was least perceived was that of supplementary services.</p> <p>The two propositions that customers mostly perceive the brand as are those that Ryanair is mostly known for, namely their low costs and their efficiency. Perhaps the other two have been communicated less and have been talked about less often (word-of-mouth). Additionally, Ryanair's slogans over the years have mostly included the words 'low fares', 'more choice', and 'made simple'. These words are related to the propositions 'low costs', 'wide choice', and 'efficiency', respectively. This, thus does also not include a focus on supplementary services. Furthermore, as supplementary services are provided by Ryanair, but operationalised by other companies, this might not resonate with the customer as much as belonging to their entire experience with Ryanair. This might explain why customers do not perceive the brand in terms of this proposition.</p>
<u>easyJet</u>	<p>From the analysis performed in this research, it can be concluded that customers mostly perceive easyJet as a brand that mostly provides easiness and enjoyableness. The proposition that was least perceived was that of variety.</p> <p>The proposition easiness is mostly perceived as simple procedures and quickness of the service, and enjoyableness is mostly perceived through the evaluation of interactions with employees, which were perceived to be friendly and attentive. easyJet's variety might not be perceived as much as this is mostly part of the first stages in the customer journey (search/purchase), and not throughout the whole experience. This might explain why customers do not perceive the brand in terms of this proposition.</p>
<u>KLM</u>	<p>From the analysis performed in this research, it can be concluded that customers mostly perceive KLM as a brand that provides memorability and cherishes their nationality. The propositions that were least perceived were that of sustainability, the offering of (multiple) options, and their pride and evolution.</p> <p>KLM's heritage is perceived by customers because of their colours, their mentality, cuisine, etc. KLM's memorability is mostly perceived in combination with their nationality in the form of the Delft Blue miniature houses, and through the interactions with the crew, which often were perceived as special. Opposite to this, is KLM's offering of (multiple) options, which is not perceived as such by the customers. Just as mentioned for easyJet, this might be because this is more part of the first few stages of the experience, as opposed to throughout it all.</p>
<u>British Airways</u>	<p>From the analysis performed in this research, it can be concluded that customers mostly perceive British Airways as a brand that provides benevolence and comfort. The proposition that was least perceived was that of their Britishness.</p> <p>British Airways' benevolence is perceived as such by customers mostly through the interactions with the staff. The offering comfort is mostly perceived as such through the comfort of the seats, but also the fact that this caused for a very good night sleep and the feeling that the flight flew by.</p> <p>Their Britishness, however, was not perceived by customers based on the experience. This is interesting, as the nationality of KLM did shine through very nicely. So, why is one airline's nationality perceived, while the other's is not? It could be caused by the success of embodiment of the brand proposition in the experience. Perhaps, KLM's nationality is more in line with their visions and their other propositions (such as sustainability); whereas this is not the case for British Airways (such as high-tech). This might explain why customers do not perceive British Airways in terms of this proposition.</p>
<u>Virgin Atlantic</u>	<p>From the analysis performed in this research, it can be concluded that customers mostly perceive Virgin Atlantic as a brand that provides extravagance. The propositions that were least perceived were that of subversiveness.</p> <p>Out of all of the five airlines, Virgin Atlantic's brand is mostly perceived in terms of (all) its brand propositions.</p>

Note: For more a more elaborate version (including quotations/examples), see Appendix 8

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings Empirical Research in Relation to the Literature Review

The data shows that brand meaning prior to an experience (based on previous experience, WOM, reputation, etc., in other words, brand image) can create expectations for the 'current experience'. The current experience, in turn, provides a base to compare the expectations with perception, and based on the (dis)alignment alter perceptions accordingly. These findings are in line with Stach (2018), who mentions that past experiences, for a big part, influence brand meaning; and with Helkkula et al. (2012, p.59) who state that value-in-the-experience is the "individual service customers' lived experiences of value that extend beyond the current context of service use to also include and past and future experiences and service customers' broader lifeworld contexts". In line with this view, many reviewers tend to compare their experience to what they have experienced before and what they know. This can be based on experiences they have had in the past with other airlines, as this provides for a nice ground to compare and make sense of their experience. The comparisons uncover those aspects that differentiate an airline and the data shows that these aspects seem to be in line with the brand propositions.

Building on this notion that value-in-the-experience is not only based on past and future experiences, but also on a customer's broader lifeworld context, Andreini et al. (2018) mention that interactions are always context-specific and thus always affect the ways experiences are evaluated. In addition, Legendre et al. (2020, p.15) state that if a customer's brand experience takes place in a special context, this can help "him/her in becoming more involved and finding meaningfulness in the experience, and thus form greater readiness to store memory of the event". This indicates that memorable experiences could increase the chances of the customer storing positive associations of the brand in mind. Furthermore, Schmitt (1999, p.57) states that customers do not only want the functional aspects of a product, but nowadays more so experiences which are able to "dazzle their sense, touch their hearts, and stimulate their minds (...) that they can incorporate into their lifestyles". The data shows that memorable experiences – which can be described as special, meaningful, unforgettable, etc. – could make customers form more positive associations in their mind, which seems to be in line with research. Similarly, the extent to which the reviewers felt like they were treated with respect also showed in analysing the data. Especially for KLM and Virgin Atlantic, many reviewers felt like that they were treated like 'royalty' and felt as if they were special guests more so than just another passenger. This 'respect' makes customers feel as if the experience is more personable, and thus more memorable. Furthermore, an airline's helpfulness (regardless of whether it is part of their brand proposition) seems to greatly influence the brand perception positively, as this is seen as something that is greatly appreciated by customers. This helpfulness includes flexibility in case problems occur and going above and beyond for those that need extra care.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) state that symbolic meanings of more subjective characteristics are important to focus on when regarding the experiential view. These include the aspects of a product which provide, for example, entertainment or leisure. These aspects can be both verbal and non-verbal and are mostly aimed at stimulating consumers' senses. The data showed little to no support of this approach to defining the brand experience. The reviews did uncover meanings customers formed through the experience; however, these did not seem to stem from aspects of the experience that stimulated (multiple) senses.

Clatworthy (2012) states that it is important for companies to deliver alignment between proposition and experience. So, let us assume experience is in line with expectations, and there thus seems to be an alignment between expectations and perception (experience). The expectations can be based on factors such as previous experience, WOM, reputation, etc. However, especially important for evaluating the brand experience, the expectations can also be based on the brand proposition. If a brand delivers the service they propose (e.g., "providing service with a friendly smile") and the customer perceives this as such (e.g., "the brand does exactly what it says on the tin"), this will most likely affect the brand meaning the customer holds. The data shows that various reviewers did experience and voice this alignment, and it seems as if they appreciated the fact that they received what they expected, as it was voiced with positivity. Interestingly, the most explicit voicing of alignment seemed to stem from customers that travelled with Ryanair (providing the most basic service out of the five airlines), as various of them state that Ryanair does what it says on the tin. This seems to be in line with Klubi (2020, p.70), who states that "people prefer brands that express their actual images, and not necessarily a perfect image of them". It is important to note, however, that the number of reviewers who explicitly stated this alignment is few. Nevertheless, these findings do imply that brands are not comparable in an absolute scale and already provides some support to the fact that brands can differentiate themselves based on their brand and brand experiences are evaluated based on (brand) meanings as opposed to along a good/bad spectrum.

More implicitly were characteristics of airlines that were highlighted by reviewers, such as "you get what you pay for" for Ryanair, "don't expect glamour or chic, it's a Dutch company" for KLM, and "all the trappings associated with luxury" for Virgin Atlantic. These statements do not explicitly show an alignment between expectations (brand meaning and brand proposition) and perception (experience), however they do imply that brands are perceived in terms of meanings which arise through the embodiment of the brand propositions in the interactions. Furthermore, these statements also show support for the fact that an experience cannot be perceived as simply 'good' or 'bad'; it has more to do with the extent to which a brand comes alive in the experience, and thus the extent to which the brand can be perceived in terms of its brand propositions (which are embodied in the interactions).

It is also possible for brands to 'over-deliver'; in other words, experiences might exceed expectations. In fact, Berry et al. (2006) note that it is not sufficient to meet a customers' expectations, since customers expect companies to keep their promise. Therefore, to increase service experience, companies need to exceed the customer's expectations. Again, the expectations can be based on factors such as previous experience, WOM, reputation, etc., or it can be based on the brand proposition. This brings about an interesting question in terms of differences between airlines. Ryanair seems to have the most negative reputation out of the airlines (based on the data); this might lead their customers to have very little expectations going into their experience. Logically, customers can thus only be positively impressed by the actual experience, even if Ryanair does what they promise and not over-deliver. Whereas, an airline such as Virgin Atlantic, who seems to have a positive reputation (based on the data), might have to over-deliver in order to impress the customer (as they naturally expect the airline to deliver as promised). The data shows that most expectations (in terms of perceptions exceeding expectations) are based on previous experience and reputation.

Findings Empirical Research in Relation to the Brand Propositions

The aforementioned highlights several findings from the data that are in line or oppose the literature discussed in the theoretical framework. And as mentioned, these findings already provide some support for the fact that brands are perceived in terms of their brand propositions and brand experiences are perceived as meanings. The analysis of the customer reviews in terms of the brand propositions find extended support for this.

From the analysis performed in this research, it can be concluded that Ryanair's embedment of their brand propositions in the service interactions is mostly perceived as such by their customers. The main propositions that are evaluated through the experience seem to be their low costs and their efficiency, whereas the offering of supplementary services is least apparent and least perceived as a Ryanair proposition. Interestingly, some customers very explicitly stated that Ryanair does exactly what it says on the tin. easyJet is also mostly perceived in terms of its brand propositions by their customers. The main propositions that are evaluated through the experience seem to be easiness and enjoyableness, whereas their variety is least apparent and least perceived as an easyJet proposition. KLM only seems to moderately be perceived in terms of its brand propositions by their customers. The main propositions that are evaluated through the experience seem

to be the memorability of the experience and their heritage in terms of nationality, whereas their sustainability, the offering of (multiple) options, and their heritage in terms of pride and evolution are least apparent and least perceived as KLM propositions. British Airways also seems to moderately be perceived in terms of its brand propositions by their customers. The main propositions that are evaluated through the experience seem to be their benevolence and the offering of comfort, whereas their Britishness, and heritage are least apparent and least perceived as British Airways propositions.

Virgin Atlantic seems to be mostly perceived by their customers in terms of its brand propositions. The main proposition that is evaluated through the experience seems to be their extravagance, whereas their subversiveness is least apparent and least perceived as a Virgin Atlantic proposition (there is evidence that the brand is perceived in terms of this proposition as well; just the least out of Virgin Atlantic’s propositions). One reviewer even states that “everything about the Virgin Experience is just that, and experience”. This seems to be exactly the thing that Virgin Atlantic was trying to achieve when they started operating, as they themselves state: “[talking about other airlines] What a dull, grey experience that was (...). The time was right for someone to come in and shake things up. And did we ever” (Virgin Atlantic, n.d.-c).

Virgin Atlantic is the airline (in this sample), whose customers form the strongest brand associations; Virgin Atlantic seems to best differentiate itself from the competition. Even though each airline is perceived in terms of at least one or a few brand propositions, Virgin Atlantic is the only airline which is perceived in terms of all its brand propositions. Interestingly, most of Virgin Atlantic’s propositions are embedded in the service experience through interactions between customers and the crew, which shows the importance of interactions in the experience. It also shows – comparing Virgin Atlantic to the other airlines – (a) the importance of establishing brand propositions which are suitable for embedment in the service experience, and/or (b) the importance of spending time, effort, and money into making sure that your envisioned brand propositions are significantly well embedded in the service experience.

Overall, the findings indicate that Ryanair, easyJet and Virgin Atlantic were mostly perceived in terms of their brand propositions. Most interesting, is the fact that Ryanair and easyJet are the two low-cost airlines (among this sample) and Virgin Atlantic is one of the most luxurious airlines (among this sample). This indicates that brand experiences cannot be evaluated as good or bad; the data shows that brand experience is evaluated based on the (brand) meanings, which are embedded into the experience through the brand proposition. This contests the (still) common view that experiences are evaluated along a good/bad scale, as this would have resulted in findings that showed that Ryanair and easyJet are the worst as their service includes very few extras and is no-nonsense, whereas Virgin Atlantic would then be the best as it is very luxurious. However, as the findings of this research have shown, brand experiences are evaluated based on (brand) meanings and not along a good/bad scale.

Addressing the Research Question

This research has attempted to formulate an answer to the following research question:

How are the concepts of brand, experience, and (brand) meaning connected in forming the brand experience?

Figure 7 provides a clarification of the relations between brand, experience, brand meaning, its outcomes, and the way in which they are connected in forming the experience. This figure thus provides a visual overview of the answers to the sub-questions (which is grounded on theory) and the main research question (which is grounded on theory and built on by the empirical research).

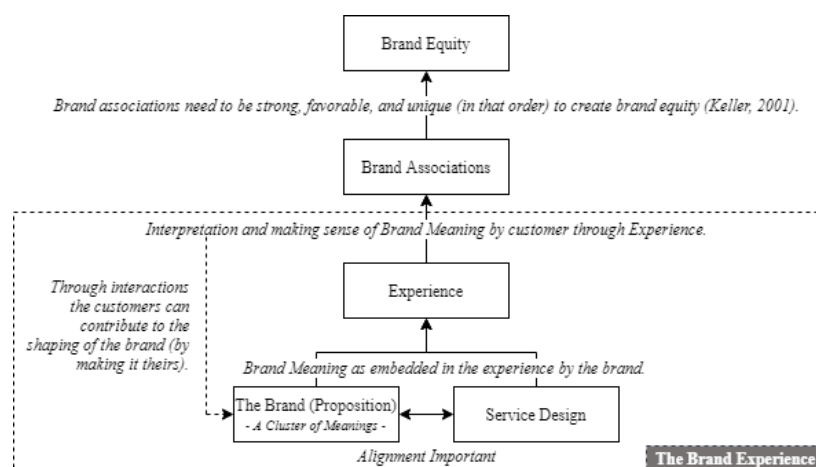


Figure 7: Brand Experience: Relations Brand, Brand Meaning, Experience, and its Outcomes (Theoretical)

The literature shows that brand meanings are embedded in the experience by the brand through the embodiment of the brand propositions (e.g., Clatworthy, 2012; Stach, 2018). Customers can use the experience to interpret and make sense of brand meaning, and as a result form brand associations in their minds (e.g., Andreini et al., 2018; Batey, 2016; Iglesias et al., 2013; Ind & Coates, 2013). Furthermore, brands are essentially clusters of meanings (e.g., Batey, 2016; Fournier, 1998); this also explains the fact that brands are co-created by customers and are not solely a product of a marketer’s imagination (e.g., Akaka et al., 2014; Berry, 2000). As a customer engages with a brand, through their experience, the customer can create/alter brand meaning (e.g., Iglesias et al., 2013; Ind & Coates, 2013). This brand meaning contributes to the forming of brand associations. If the brand associations that are formed appear to be positive, brand equity will increase.

The theoretical review has provided the following outline to explain the nature of the brand experience:

- (a) Brand meaning is embedded in the experience through the embodiment of the brand propositions;
- (b) Through the experience the customers can make sense of brand meaning;
- (c) Brands are clusters of meanings as they are not solely defined by the marketer but co-created by the customer through the interactions and creation of (brand) meaning.

This outline answers the three sub-questions and uncovers the relationships between the three concepts – brand, experience, and brand meaning. It also provides support for the outcomes of the empirical research:

A very clear example of a brand proposition that is nicely embedded in the experience – and shows alignment between the brand proposition and service design – is the offering of a Delft miniature house of a typical Dutch building by KLM. This offering highlights their heritage and ‘Dutchness’. Pine II & Gilmore (1998) explain that memorabilia – a positive cue – can prove to be an object that reminds the customer of their experience; thus, increasing the memorability of the experience.

The previous example mainly provides a practical illustration of the importance of alignment between the brand proposition and service design. A very clear example of the explanation of the complete nature of the brand experience is provided by Virgin Atlantic. Virgin Atlantic states to be ‘extravagant’ and ‘entertaining’ (among others) and operates based on the vision to shake things up and make air travel exciting. This vision and their propositions are embedded in their interactions with the customer, for example, through humorous staff, and the provision of luxurious pyjamas. By evaluating their experiences and leaving a customer review, the customers show that through the experience they have been able to make sense and alter brand meaning: “In short, all trappings associated with luxury.”; “Cheerful way to cross the Atlantic”. These experiences and the resulting brand meanings will contribute to the further development of the Virgin Atlantic brand as they will be further communicated – with the customer reviews as a prime example. Figure 8 shows the integration of this practical example into the figure shown before (Figure 7).

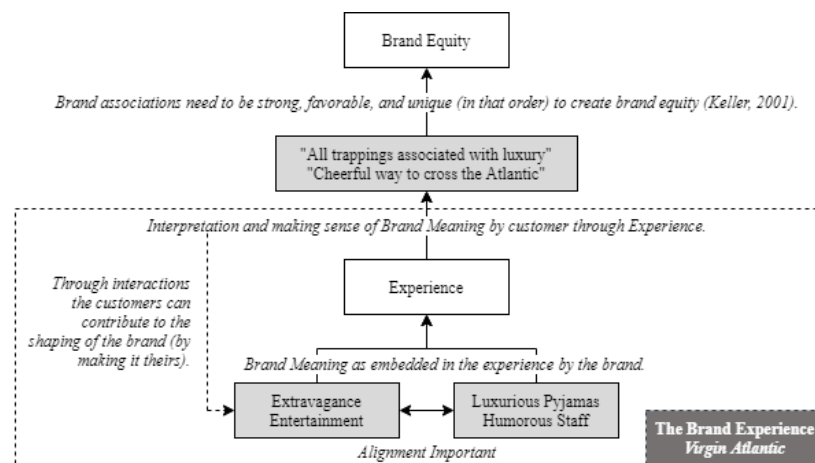


Figure 8: Brand Experience: Relations Brand, Brand Meaning, Experience, and its Outcomes (Empirical)

Overall, the results of the literature review and the empirical research (airline analysis) have provided a more detailed description of the nature of the brand experience and have provided support for the fact that brand experience can only be evaluated based on (brand) meanings and not along a spectrum of good and bad.

6. CONCLUSION

This research has – by analysing three sub-questions that are grounded on theory, and by conducting an empirical research that builds on theory in order to answer the main research question – provided support for the fact that a brand is a meaning that is communicated to the customers through their experiences (embodiment of the brand proposition). This leads to the

conclusion that brand experience is perceived as meanings and cannot simply be evaluated along a good/bad spectrum. In other words, the nature of the brand experience is grounded on these meanings.

Contributions to Practice and Research

This research provides the following five contributions to practice. Companies and especially marketing/brand managers can use the findings of this research to better understand: (1) the importance of making sure the brand experience is positive, as it can ultimately lead to higher brand equity and potentially higher brand loyalty; (2) the nature of and how to influence the brand experience; (3) the significance of the brand, and thus brand management; (4) that a brand can be a strong differentiator for its name, but maybe even more so for the associations that are formed through brand experience; brand experience is not simply good or bad, but it is evaluated based on meanings; and (5) the importance of the ‘correct’ embodiment of the brand proposition in the experience including the management of interactions. These contributions provide useful information for practice as it allows for firms to alter their branding strategy accordingly.

The contributions of this research to academic research are threefold. First, research will benefit from this clarification of the nature of the brand experience, as this analysis has provided support for the fact that the brand experience is not simply evaluated along a spectrum of good bad. The evaluation of the brand experience takes place based on meanings and this knowledge provides researchers with a basis to further build research on the brand experience, and how to positively influence this. Second, this research has used a distinctive method to qualitative research, which can be further used and build upon to better analyse the way meanings emerge in experiences. And third, this research and its limitations give rise to directions for future research, as will be further detailed in the following section.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations might have affected the results of this research. As mentioned, these limitations do give rise to directions for future research.

First, the industry that was chosen to select a sample from – the airline industry – is an industry which offers homogeneous services. It would be interesting to see the research be conducted in a different industry, perhaps one that offers products as heterogeneous services, such as the car industry. Furthermore, Keller (2001) states that within the airline industry, very few brands manage to attain significant brand equity. This, mostly because those brands do not elicit brand meaning which includes brand associations that are strong, favourable, and unique (in that order) (ibid.). The findings of this research did prove that the airlines (from this sample) did show positive brand associations, but it would be interesting for future research to analyse whether it might be even stronger for other industries.

Second, the brand propositions that arose from the textual analysis, semiotic analysis, and the resulted clustering, were established by the researcher, and backed up by the branding expert. The discussion between the researcher and the branding expert was conducted to increase reliability, however subjectivity still poses a risk in this process. Therefore, future research could possibly include the view of various experts, brand owners, and/or customers to increase the breadth of perspectives and the reliability of this process. This could, for example, be achieved in future research by adopting a participative design that also incorporates collaboration between various stakeholders (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Third, the method of research included the analysis of customer reviews. In other words, the analysis only included the analysis of *customers*. Yet, literature shows that the brand experience is a construct that applies to both customers and non-customers, and it could be lived or imaginary. Therefore, future research could focus on the analysis of the nature of the brand experience by focusing on the emergence of (brand) meaning for non-customers. This could, for example, be established by distributing a survey that poses questions based on the brand and interactions with the brand, except for the actual use of the product/service.

Fourth, as mentioned before, the goal of this research was not to *measure* the differences between the airlines in terms of strongest associations or strongest differentiation. However, it could be valuable for future research, to focus on this measurement by adopting a quantitative research design to strengthen and complement the current research.

Finally, as Figure 7 shows, service design plays a major role in assuring alignment between brand proposition and customer perception. The focus in this research has been on uncovering the nature of the brand experience and the emergence of (brand) meaning, however future research could focus on the role service design plays in the brand experience. This service design can, for example, include clues, which are able to shape an experience by influencing a customer’s behaviour, feelings, and thoughts (Berry et al., 2006). Clues carry messages and can thus communicate brand propositions in the customer experience (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel, 2002). Research on service design would especially contribute to practice as it provides companies with a clearer understanding how to improve brand experience.

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9. Appendices

For the Appendices, please see attachment.