EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND BRAND IMAGE VIA CASE STUDIES AT GERMAN DEALERSHIPS

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ABSTRACT:

There has been an increase of attention on the term customer experience and it became a buzzword in marketing. However, marketing science has been slow in developing new literature insights on customer experience. To address this gap, this paper explores how car companies are successfully establishing their brands with the help of customer experience management techniques. A series of case studies examining three German luxury car brands - namely Mercedes, BMW and Audi - has been conducted in a rural to midsized urban setting in West-Germany. The studies include the analysis of customers, employees and physical elements of the dealerships. Main findings include that dealerships who provide vehicles in rural to midsized populated areas have challenges to attract customers because of their remote locations. Practises that offer experience to customers are promotions and events. Overall, there is plenty of experience offered, not only the cars provide experience but also the service offerings like inspections or a friendly but professional atmosphere provided by the sales people. The dealerships itself are having smart designs and layouts that help amplifying the customer experience. All these measurements can help establish and facilitate brand images that is set by the extensive histories of the brands.

Keywords : Automotive Industry, Customer Experience Centric Perspective, Brand Management

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's consumer world, there is a lot of experience a customer can have in a company's offering, from the features of a product to customer care and advertising (Schwager & Meyer, 2018). Concentrating solely on traditional elements such as price, product and quality may not be enough to sustain sustainable competitive advantage (Gentile, Spiller, Noci, 2007). Therefore, there has been an increase of attention on customer experience and the term became a major buzzword in marketing (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Different scholars have tried to define customer experience, and overall, the concept is defined as a multi-level construct, which include cognition, feeling and emotions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Physical elements are also included in those levels as well as the external contact and experience to and from a company.

Customers experience the service a company offers every time they interact with a given firm, and the companies therefore influence how the customers perceive the brand. That is why it is important to make sure that the customer can experience the company in the best way. Moreover, if customer service is executed in good manners, the customers should be able to appreciate the provided services (Seybold, 2010). Customer experience has been discussed in literature since the 1960's and has shifted in focus on various aspects and attributes on what is considered important to tackle to perform successfully in marketing. However, what are important aspects in the 21st Century and how is customer experience managed today in a much-changed environment. Lemon & Verhoef (2016) states that the importance lays within customer engagement and the

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recognized role of that party. People always had the desire to express themselves based on what they own and that means today the brand can tell what they value and appreciate (Smith & Wheeler, 2002).

"Freude am Fahren", "Vorsprung durch Technik", and "Das Beste oder Nichts". These are well known brand slogans from German automotive makers that have a rich company history containing well defined premium attributes. BMW, Audi and Mercedes managed to produce not just cars but also so much more. They provide a whole world of experience and a status symbol that show success and wealth. This experience that customers go through with the products is why they can attract a huge fan base and bind them as loyal customers. Brands that can connect with the customers' emotions are those that can reflect the customers core values (Berry, 2000).

One of the major purchases an individual can do is buying a car and for many people a car delivers plenty of experience. But how are those perceptions managed at the sales level where the customer comes into touch with the products provided? And how do those dealerships make themselves visible in a local setting they operate in? Dealerships have several ways of providing customers with customer experience. It includes service packages and advertising campaigns and much more. In this paper, there will be a focus on how customers experience a car brand in the cases of Mercedes, Audi and BMW and how those manufacturers manage the customer experience to increase their Brand Image.

1.2 Knowledge Gap and Relevance

Customer experience is of increasing importance and applying and analysing the Customer Experience Centric Perspective on current practices may give helpful insights for brand equity management. The car industry is a big market and the academic literature would benefit from the insights on current practices made, as it would be applied and connected to current theories that are held in the academic world.

Buil, Martínez and de Chernatony (2013, p.62) noticed that "the value of a brand is derived in the market through the actions of consumers". They note that most scholars acknowledge that brand equity possesses positive effects on customer response, however there is a scarcity of empirical research that investigates the relationship between customer-based brand equity and customer response especially regarding especially at the car dealerships. Marketing science has been slow in developing new literature insights on customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Addressing this gap, there is the need to explain how car companies are successfully adapting their brands, with the help of customer experience management techniques, to show how important the overall involvement of customers can be. Especially through the eyes of the customers and of companies and the two different perspectives that result.

Furthermore, it is interesting to see how companies manage the challenge on how to manage customer experience from a brand management perspective as it is of importance too. In just a few decades the average customer base has become more complex and harder to grasp (Kahn & Rahman, 2016).

2. LITERATURE

Managing the Brand through Customer Experience

Brand Management is defined as a process that creates relationships between a company's product and emotional perception to differ among competition and establishing loyalty among customers (Hislop, 2001). Customer experience is about perceptions, and many of those perceptions are related to a brand and the expectations they can generate. Therefore, it is crucial for a company and entails a lot of importance for business planning. There has been a focus on the importance of building strong emotional connections between a brand and the customers (Morison and Crane, 2007). Research is acknowledging the fact that modern customers are no longer buying only

the products but also the emotional experience that is provided. However, companies are forced to rethink their offerings and must shift to selling a whole experience (Morrison & Crane, 2007) to stay competitive. Urde (1999) argues that the brand should form the basis of a company's interaction with its customers which forms a company that deliberately and actively attempts to manage the processes (e.g. customer experience) that give the brand value and meaning. The brand establishes itself as a symbol in an ongoing interaction between the customers and the firm, it is important that it satisfies the needs and wants of the customers within the framework of the brand. What he stresses is that brands should not be formed dominantly and only by its customers' desires, but rather brands should be used as a future orientated resource and strategic platform. Especially when considering that the brand should be seen as an asset that plays part in the long-term success of a company (Davis, 2002) A strategy focusing on creating the whole experience that includes awareness rising, establishing associations and loyalty can help building up brand strength (Urde, 1999) and long-term success.

It is worthwhile to see what kind of practices in companies exist that tackle customer experience. Creating a customer experience that becomes synonymous with the brand is increasingly recognised as an essential driver of corporate performance, companies like Disney, Southwest Airlines or Amazon are creating already a loyal customer base by delivering branded customer experience that establishes value for customers to a much further extend than only selling products (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). A report from IBM acknowledges that customer experience is crucial for firms when building devotion to brands, channels and services (Badgett, Boyce, & Kleinberger, 2007). The authors believe that the customer needs to be turned from shoppers into advocates in order to "create a sustainable, differentiated [competitive] advantage" (ibid., p.1). However, having a deeper understanding of customer needs is just the first step. The goal should be that customers are

recommending the services to others, spend more money on the services and make them more loyal to the company.

2.2 Customer-centricity

Extraordinary experience is established when a company manages to provide high levels of emotional intensity (Arnould & Price, 1993) and once an emotional connection is created a customer is willing to recommend the product/services and is willing to return (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). That means that Badgett et al. (2007) advise that a firm needs to become more of a customer-focused enterprise that can mix the customer perspective with the traditional product-centric approach; for the authors, four characteristics need to be tackled in order to improve customer experience: The first one is that they understand the needs of the customer and the touchpoints between the customer and the firm. The second is that the firm puts a high priority on transforming the needs into relevant decisions. The third point is to understand how the customer feels about using the services and how he/she uses it. At last, the investment decisions made need to reflect what is best for the customers and their experience (Badgett, Boyce, & Kleinberger 2007). Companies who focus on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty have been shown to have the best performance, according to marketing research (Rust, Moorman, & Dickson 2002) and having the previously mentioned focus can even help to outperform other companies (Mittal et al., 2005).

Furthermore, it is important to get to know what customer base a company should form and to target. Rover Cars faced a period in the 1990s where they try to manifest themselves as a niche player and therefore they felt the need to adapt to the needs of the target groups. They discovered eight customer profile groups and targeted three of them based on that research Rover could please a distinctive customer group (Jones, 1997). The segmentation of potentially profitable customers becomes increasingly important for companies. That tells us that the development of effective and successful competitive

positioning should start with research that helps to define the target market (Kim & Chung, 1997, Darling, 2001). Automakers know that customers are their priority and therefore it is important to clarify and to understand what the customers need and want (Jones, 1997) and a defined target market will help to achieve the objective of enabling a customer centric focus. Keep in mind that the value of brands is originating in the market through the actions of customers (Buil, Martínez, de Chernatony, 2013). It is important to put the customer at the very centre where he/she is the co-creator of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), where the brand becomes the experience (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and therefore this establishes a competitive position.

3.3 Managing Employees

 Companies need to make sure that the customer experience is ensured at sales level, the employees need to be able to identify with the brand culture (Mosley, 2007) and they need to understand that they are the ambassadors of a brand (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). A brand that is strong provide internal focus and clarity within a company (Davis, 2002). To execute the role as an ambassador successfully employees must have appropriate knowledge about the brand to deliver the expected brand promise (Erkmen, 2018). It must be acknowledged that employees have a significant contribution on the service experience (Mosley, 2007) and attention needs to be taken that the management of employees enriches the outcomes that benefit the customer (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). That includes the experience that they manage and therefore the concepts of customer experience must be understood (Humburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2015). "Strong brands embody a clear, valued, and sustainable point of difference" (Davis, 2002, p.352). Apple has established its retail stores and is known to provide people with great experience. Apple has greatly concentrated on training its employees which is considered a major competitive advantage. Relationship building is also of an important matter and the employees are taught to

establish a connection to the customer. The big brand has identified that customers want to feel special and therefore they try to meet that criterion. Apple avoids the usual sales language, employees even lack traditional job titles such as cashier. Instead, Apple uses the word "geniuses" (Gallo, 2015). Gallo (2015) states as soon the employees and the company itself understand the difference between selling products and building relationships, the sooner a company is build that people talk about and buy their products.

This means for car dealerships that they should give great attention to their sales people. Customers want attention when they walk inside the store as the car buying process needs much more assistance compared to a shopping spree at the supermarket. It is a complex process which includes negotiations, paperwork and after-care, therefore it is beneficial when the dealerships employees understand and identify with the brand to ultimately deliver the best customer experience.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

 An improved Customer Experience should boost the reputation of the brand including the Brand experience and Brand Imagery. To meet the objective of improving customer experience it is worthwhile to consider a Customer-Centric perspective. Three established models and theories are going to be discussed in the following section that will explore customer centricity. Customer Experience Centric Perspective describes a close relationship between customers and the company where the customer has been put at the focus point.

One theory that tackles the objective of customer centricity is the Seven Pillars of the Customer Centric Business Model (Dunnhumby, 2017). The Dunnhumby organisation established seven pillars of a customer centric business model. This model prioritises customer values and tries to create understanding of the customer. It defines price, range and service, promotions, affinity, rewards, ease and communications as areas

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that can be subject to provide improved customer experience and branding and therefore have a positive impact on business. The organisation has found that brand affinity is build up through a personal connection, these pillars try to help establish this personal connection. The first pillar discusses affinity, creating the emotional connection to customers to they see their own values reflected in the communicated values from the brand.

The next pillar describes that a good amount of choices must be made available by a wide range of quality products which are also presented in an appealing way. Service practises need to be provided in an equally good manner. Products and Services need to be developed with the customer in mind. Innovation should contribute to the customer and should influence the customer positively. "Pride of Ownership is real" and therefore something that needs to be realized accordingly (Kelly, 2018).

Promotions are defined as another pillar. These promotions need to be clear and easily understandable which also provide good options for the customers. The offering of promotions can help boost customers' interaction and can lead to new customers as well. Sometimes profit can come short, however it will benefit in the long term. The fourth pillar is about price, the pricing of products and services need to be set fairly, providing the feeling that the purchase is worth the money. Communication defines the fifth pillar. Positioning and management of a brand towards the customer happens through the actions of communication which includes how advertisements are visualised in tone and in style (Urde, 1999) through new (social media, internet) and traditional media (radio, print). The communication should be relevant and personal with inspiring content and relevancy for the customers. The communication should focus on personalization providing tailored experiences to customers (Kelly, 2018). Ease describes the six pillar and it means providing an easy shopping experience for the customer, without

complicated procedures that hinder a positive customer experience. The last pillar is about rewarding the customer. A practise that helps building customer loyalty and to successfully obtain that objective several measurements need to be undertaken. Such as recognizing and rewarding long-term customers and communicating the appreciation that customers are using the provided products and services (Kelly, 2018).

The appearance of the facility where the products and services are presented and provided also play a crucial role in providing customer experience. The ability of influencing behaviours based on atmospheric elements can shape the brand image. Hooper & Coughlan (2012) noted that there is no second chance when making the first impression and especially on the sales level it is the first impression a customer can make that makes a difference. Bitner (1992) has therefore developed the Servicescape model. The model is and a so called stimulus-organism-response model (SOR model) that treats the physical elements from the environment as the stimulus and the response is the behaviour from the customer. Considered are the facilities exterior (e.g. of a dealership) and the looks of the building. And on the other hand, the interior, such as choice of furniture, equipment and layout. The elements can be categorised into categories. These environmental inputs are of sensory, spatial and symbolic nature. The sensory aspect includes the ambient conditions such as the ambient noise, lighting and odour. The spatial aspect specifies the space and the function of the facility (e.g. layout) including the equipment used (e.g. cash registers and furniture). But also signs and symbols form a category. The whole formation interplay with each other that ends ideally into synergy. The customers will react at the end to what they are using and seeing and will provide an adequate response. The model shows that there are different types of response: individual response (approach and avoid) and interaction responses (e.g. social interactions).

Customer experience and Brand management can be build up through various aspects inside the firm, if it is about visual elements that represent the brand or from the quality of service offerings performed by employees all these three models and theories have a different scope of focus.
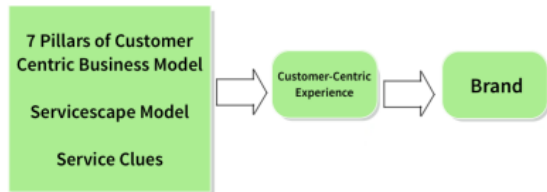

Figure 1. Various models contributing to the establishment of positive customer experience which helps brand establishment.

3.1 Brand Identity Model

The second part of the thesis is to have a look between the alignment of customer experience and brand proposition. Establishing Branded Customer Experience evolves from aligning the whole organisation behind the customer proposition (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). One model that deals with the topic is the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 1996). The model will be used to analyse the propositions made by BMW, Mercedes and Audi. Brand Identity is an important aspect when dealing with brand management and it is about how to ensure identification of the brand with customers and the association of the brand to products or services (Keller, 2013). That is why from a brand management view the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 1996) helps to understand how these customer practises can enhance brand identity and brand manifestation.

The model has six elements playing a role in Brand Identity. The first element is about the physical attributes of a brand. It includes how the physiques of a brand can turn abstract and tangible elements into crucial qualities. This part of the model is discussed as being the "brand's backbone" (Kapferer, 2012, p.182) as it is very important to concentrate on the products main elements for branding. Physical elements, like the classic Coca-Cola bottle

help the product to be unique and to stand out, it enables to establish a competitive advantage, something that other companies are not able to imitate.

Culture, the third element, should be part of every brand, and indeed there is rarely a cult brand without an appropriate culture. It contains a set of values that are deeply integrated into the foundation of a brand. Samsung for example has a deep and strong connected community of tech-savvy people that value the company, they perceive Samsung not only as a brand that provides consumer products but more of experience of the latest technology. Brand culture "indicates the whole ethos whose values are embodied in the products and services" (Kapferer, 2012, p.185) it provides.

The fourth element discusses Self-image and it refers to how customers are seeing themselves in a given brand. Using a selfimage is of advantage as it can be used to incorporate it into the brand itself. Customers see themselves in certain ways when connecting to a brand. Attributes such as confidence or classiness, or elegance enable the customer to feel in such ways when deciding for the brand.

Reflection makes up the fifth element of this model. A brand will end up building a reflection or an image of the customer. Reflection includes stereotypical beliefs or attributes of a target market and how a customer is seen as a result when using a product or a service.

Finally, a brand forms a relationship. The facets of a relationship that a brand tries to deliver to the customer (e.g. friendliness or sportiness) have an impact on how a company is acting and relating towards its customers.
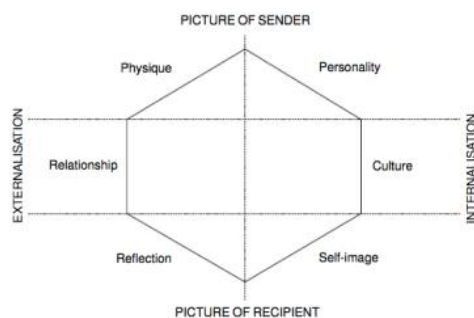
Figure 5.1. Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 1996, 2012).

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Case Selection

This section will elaborate why Mercedes, BMW and Audi has been chosen. As previously mentioned they have a rich automotive history and have a lot of heritage that includes various attributes. They entail luxury, sportiness and refinedness etc., attributes that define a premium image and that help to tackle a similar customer base. But only similar, as BMW for example follows to be more sporty compared to Mercedes. These customers are more affluent and educated with mid to higher job positions. That is why to narrow down the research it will be feasible to concentrate on similar attributes. It is important to link the automotive practices that focus around services to customers to be able to link it to the theory of Customer Experience Centric Perspective.

4.2 Data Collection and Analyses

This paper will answer to the research question via qualitative research in order to understand the meaning that individuals have built up about their environment and their experiences (Merriam, 2002) and therefore, three case studies will be conducted. The case studies will follow the principle of triangulation to get multiple viewpoints on the processes that provide customer experience at car dealerships. As the there are multiple studies, the paper will contain a cross-case analysis (Yin, 2009). The three case studies will all be presented separately and follow the same objectives, however the analysis of all the results get presented in a separate section.

Each of the case studies will concentrate on one German luxury brand (Table 1), the structure of the research follows similarities in executions to Yu & Sangiorgi (2018) as it also an exploratory case research. The case studies include observations of the sales rooms and customers. Also, semi-structured interviews with customers were held as well with sales employees. Obtaining primary data from interviews from people working at car dealerships may be beneficial as they experience first-hand contact to customers. Furthermore, an interview can give insights on what major points are important to consider and to get to know what the brand already does to attract and involve costumers and about strategy choices from car brands that tackle customer experience, but also what problems they face and that have been identified by car sellers when trying to attract customers. In social research, the interview method is used universally the most (Dooley & Vos, 2008). Also, literature such as leaflets and advertisements will be analysed in a semiotic approach. A semiotic approach will be used when analysing the media provided by the car dealerships to see how the appearance and characteristics influence the brand prepositions. The advertisements can tell what car manufactures are trying to resemble to customers and how their imagery realises it.

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Cases	Interviews	Key Archival Data
Mercedes	Managing director, Glandorf, Germany AMG Sales-Expert, Münster Germany Customers, Aged 50 and 49	Service-brochures, Web-presentation (Website, Social-Media) Showroom presentation
Audi	Salesperson, Münster, Germany Customer, Aged 64,	Web-presentation (Website, Social-Media), Showroom presentation
BMW	Sales consultant and business customer consultant, Versmold, Germany Customer, Aged 43	Sales-brochures, Web-presentation (Website, Social-Media), Showroom presentation

Table 6.2. Case Studies with descriptions

5 . CONCLUSION

The interpretation of the results should include a clear clarification of the research questions provided. The first subquestion that was raised dealt with the customer experience and what it means for car dealerships. It turns out that customer experience is highly regarded as important. They acknowledge based on the rural setting they operate in that customer experience is crucial to gain competitive advantage and to sell cars. The customer needs to feel welcomed and special, especially when considering what major purchase that a car can be for an individual. Most of the actions are out of control of the firm and therefore it is important to deal with the touchpoints a customer has with a firm.

The second sub-research question has dealt with the practises that are being made at car dealerships. BMW, Audi and Mercedes can attract customers with their methods. These methods include customer care with service schemes, the involvement of technologies and the establishment of hospitality. The dealerships operate under the CI (Corporate Identity) rules, however it enables plenty of opportunities to amplify customer experience. The experience that customers make is also based on the perceptions on the brand identities given. Most of the establishment of brand identity is out of the hand of the dealerships, however the given perception and CI's can be used to deliver an ultimate customer experience and to also further built upon the brand image.

The third sub-research question has tackled on how customer perceptions are being used to increase the brand value at dealerships. The actions that the dealerships do help to increase the image of the brand. They are representing the brand on the actual sales level and therefore they play are a crucial part within the companies' structure. The dealership take deep care that processes and representation are done right, and unsatisfied customers get the necessary attention they deserve. If something goes wrong the dealerships are keen on resolving the issue. They do this via letter, e-mail or telephone. The overall feedback while doing the case studies was overall positive. They were happy with the experience that they could make; however, they do feel that there is a lack of brand link at times. Especially as the values of the three companies are becoming more similar in recent times. The distinction between the brands is getting smaller as many offerings providing customer experience are similar, but is not a distinctively branded-experience.

These elements which have been provided with an answer are able to answer the main research question that has dealt with franchised car dealerships and how they manage brand images from a Customer Experience Centric Perspective in Germany. All those perceptions that are created at the showrooms or at the websites represent the brand images a company tries to resemble and communicate. The dealerships follow similar methods to convey and amplify these images. If it is with the service offerings and packages or the participation and creation of events. The case studies gave superb insights on these practises.

There are multiple scholars (mention some of these) that address the topic of customer

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experience however this research analysed on how those customer experiences are established at the sales level at car dealerships. Progress of technology difficult to handle for older customers, however they are still the majority. It is beneficial that car dealerships consider other brands and their practises regarding customer experience and brand management techniques that have been listed in this paper.

The theories that are provided in this paper can help to understand and realise improved customer experience. The expectation of this research was to understand the practises at a rural setting that dealerships operate in and the realisation of customer experience. Interesting findings include that the rural setting is a challenge to attract customers i.e. as to bring them into the store to convince them to experience the brand. Also, the price of the models is a challenge because many of the models offered from BMW, Audi and Mercedes are expansive. People fear that the increased price will not benefit the experience of the car. However, the dealerships are aware of that issue and they try to tackle the problem via convincing service packages and interesting promotions. Additionally, the technology is considered a challenge as well. Especially older buyers are not able to comprehend the advancements of the cars and it is feared that the complex technology spoils the experience. Still, the dealerships are prepared and have found measurements to give a pleasant experience to customers. Overall there is an increased use of technology when being in the buying process and when being involved in the world of experience that the brands offer. Social media and the representation on the World Wide Web give new opportunities to involve customers into new experiences. The automakers are adjusting to the new environment they operate in and therefore discontinue the non-digital brochures for example. Which may be not welcomed by the older customers, but the automakers are still required to adapt to the future and for future potential customers and their needs.

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