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Experiential Technology Brands for Generation Y

Abstract

In-depth interviews with people belonging to Generation Y demonstrate that if the informants were enabled to discuss their favorite, most preferred and loved brand, they often chose the technology brands. This empirical study seeks answers to the questions why and how the technology brands form a strong emotional bond to consumers. The aim of the study is to gauge the meaning of the technology brands and to investigate how the brand resonance is received. The current research proposes that a strong, meaningful emotional bond between a brand and a consumer forms if common consumption experiences turn into meaningful experiences. The interview data were systematically analyzed using qualitative directed content analysis methods. From the analysis emerged that the technology brands (such as Apple, Samsung and Leica) are personally relevant, have obtained a meaning for the interviewees and these brands are perceived as experiential. Thus, experiential brands have achieved the brand resonance – enhanced attachment, community and engagement. The present study contributes to the integration of two theoretical marketing concepts – consumer experience and brand resonance aiming to fill theoretical models with empirical content. Understanding the experiential aspects of brand-related behaviour offers implication for experience marketing practice.

Keywords: experience, meaningful experience, experiential brands, technology brands, word-of-mouth

Introduction

Personally relevant and meaningful experiences can generate brand advocacy, loyalty, and a positive offline and online response. A strong emotional bond to the brand triggers the wish to share the experience (Riivits-Arkonsuo, Kaljund and Leppiman 2014). Some brands have a strong and active online WOM presence (Lovett, Peres and Shachar 2013), and other perform well offline. A brand is “*a collection of perceptions held in the mind of the consumer*” while brand can act, think and feel only through the activities of the marketers (Fournier, 1998). Marketing communications can establish the brand in memory, create a brand image, engage consumers both on-line and off-line, and create experiences (Keller 2009). Experience is an economic offering and a meaningful relationship, communication between a brand, and consumers who perceive and experience meaningfully (Leppiman and Same 2011). A consumer

creates meaning to everything he/she perceives. Thus, the experience is perceived subjectively. The experiential categories that consumers create for brands are not nevertheless always the same as the categories invented by the marketers (Fournier, 1998).

Current research has focused on forming the meaningful experience. This paper aims to explore why the technology brands form a strong emotional bond to consumers and how the meaningful experience forms. We begin with an overview of consumer experience and brand resonance concepts. Building on this framework, we consider why and how technology brands form a strong emotional bond to consumers belonging to Generation Y. A detailed outline of the data collection procedure and analysis is then provided, followed by the findings. Based on the in-depth interviews conducted in this study we attempt to reconstruct what consumer experiences during the process of forming meaningful experience. We conclude by offering some notions how marketers might strength the bond between the consumer and the brand and how design their brand as experiential. In order for deeper understanding brand-consumer relationship, the present study contributes to the integration of two theoretical marketing concepts – consumer experience and brand resonance aiming to fill theoretical models with empirical content.

Conceptual framework

Experiences as an economic offer

Pine and Gilmore, who launched the experience economy theory (1998) considered experiences not as amorphous construct; but as a real an offering as any service, good, or commodity. They claim that many companies simply wrap experiences around their traditional offerings to sell them better. Experience derives from the interaction between *staged events* that Pine and Gilmore compare to theatrical play and the individual's state of mind. Experiences are not about entertainment, but companies "*stage an experience whenever they engage customers in a personal and memorable way*". (Pine and Gilmore 1998, 99) The consumer receives a mental journey that leaves them with a memory (Sundbo 2007).

Constructing experiences is an additional value and competitive advantage for the company (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Progression of economic value and competitiveness is achieved through experience economy. Experiences have become "*the predominant economic offer*" (Pine and Korn, 2011, p.3).

Concepts from the experience economy, experience construction and experience design for product and service development have so far been mainly used within tourism, hospitality, architecture, digital media, culture and entertainment sectors (Gelter 2010, Leppiman 2010, Pine and Korn 2011, Sundbo and Sørensen 2013, Tarssanen and Kylänen 2007). According to the taxonomy of experience firms (Sundbo 2007), belong above mentioned activities to primary experience sector. This sector consists of companies whose main aim is to produce experiences, exactly as tourism, events, culture, and entertainment. Those business activities are economically important part of the experience sector. In the secondary experience sector, experiences are additions to products and services; experiences are used as marketing and branding tools. Thus, experiences are profitable additions to goods and services, and consumption motivation. Experiencing life on physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual levels helps to determine the value of what consumer purchases (La Salle and Britton 2002).

Sundbo (2007) finds that experience economy is about luxury needs and dispensable commodities. According to Maslow's pyramid, it is at the top of the pyramid of needs. People seek experiences to make life more exciting and meaningful and express their social status. They are willing to pay a price for this. Demand for experiences is flighty, but it is increasing, which calls for innovation to develop the experience industries and firms to fulfill the demand: "*The*

experience economy as a much emphasized phenomenon is flighty, but as long as it lasts innovation is extremely important, exactly because of its flightiness”(Sundbo 2007, 436). Thus, consumption experience as such does not fulfil basic needs but involves feelings and emotions (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982).

Experience as a process on different levels

Several authors have addressed the experiences and experiencing as a process. Experience starts with pre-experience that prepares the consumer for experience and can be managed by marketing tools. Tynan and McKechnie (2009) and Arnould, Price and Zinkhan, (2002) take a holistic look at the consumer experience and divide it into three: the pre-experience, the customer experience, and the post-experience. Some experiences are more intense and memorable. Other experiences are more common and less interesting, therefore quickly forgotten. Such are ordinary every-day experiences. (Gelter 2006) Some experiences are short-lived, some long-lasting, stored in the consumer’s memory (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello 2009). Carù and Cova (2003) distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary experiences. An ordinary experience has to do with everyday life, routines, the past, and the passive acceptance of events. An extraordinary experience, on the other hand, evokes emotions and transformations in individuals.

Boswijk, Thijssen and Peelen (2007) conceptualize experiencing as chain-process including sensory perception, emotion, experience, meaningful experience and ending with “giving meaning”. Meaningful experience is composed of feelings, new knowledge and beliefs acquired by the consumer through a brand, a product or a service (Gelter 2006, Leppiman 2010).

According to Arnould, Price and Zinkhan (2002, 347), consumption experience begins with a pre-consumption experience involving searching for, planning, daydreaming about, foreseeing, or imagining the experience. The purchase experience derives from the choice, payment, packaging, and encounters with service and environment. The core consumption experience includes the sensation, the satiety, the satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the irritation or flow, and the transformation. The last stage of the consumption experience involves the memory of the consumption experience and the nostalgia experience.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) talk about engagement of a consumer on different levels: *“Experiences are inherently personal and existing only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual level”*.

La Salle and Britton (2002) describe level of experiences: Experienced through the senses, the physical level is one on which all goods and services are perceived. All offerings have some sensory element attached to them. The intellectual level is where people process learning and skills, evaluate preferences, recognize the first value of good or service, calculate the savings, process the concept of supply and demand, and register satisfaction. Emotional level is the hardest to predict and control. It is the level where loyalty is fostered. The final level is the spiritual realm which engages the senses, minds and emotions awakening within something deep.

Tarssanen and Kylänen (2007) suggest that the consumer’s experience forms through five levels of cognitive processes, namely the motivational, physical, intellectual, emotional, and mental levels. In Tarssanen and Kylänen’s theoretical model, which they call the ‘experience pyramid’, *“experience is regarded [as] a multisensoral, positive and comprehensive emotional experience that can lead to personal change”* (ibid.) The model has two perspectives: 1) six product elements on the horizontal axis, and 2) five levels of consumer experiences on the vertical axis. Together these can create the preconditions for a meaningful experience. The product elements on the horizontal axis of the model, contributing to consumer experience, are individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast, and interaction. Five levels

on the vertical axes are above listed as a cognitive process. The name of the model illustrates its logic. Instead of the term ‘triangle’ that refers to the relationship between three corners and angles, the authors of the model wish to highlight the presence of six experience elements on different levels of consumer experience, and the progress of experience. Therefore, the term “*experience pyramid*” can be seen as more appropriate (cf. Riiivits-Arkonsuo, Kaljundi and Leppiman 2014).

In this paper we follow the logic of the experience pyramid model in analyzing the content of qualitative interviews. We start with the motivational level, move on to the physical level where the consumer meets the brand, and further to the level of experience where, if appropriate, the emotional bond with the brand manifests itself - the brand has become experiential with an extraordinary meaning.

Brand resonance

Brand resonance refers to the intensity of the psychological bond that consumers have with the brand and their level of engagement with the brand. Brand resonance is on the top level of the extended hierarchical Brand Equity Model; also known as the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model (Keller 2009). CBBE model views brand building as an ascending step by step process, beginning from creating the 'brand salience,' in other word brand awareness. The second goal is to identify and communicate what the brand means, and what it stands for. This level includes two building blocks, 'performance' and 'imagery.' Performance refers to how well brand meets consumers' functional needs. Imagery defines how well brand meets consumers' needs on a social and psychological level. Brand response is on the third level is divided into two categories: 'judgments' and 'feelings. Brand judgment focus on consumers' opinions and evaluations; while feelings show consumer emotional responses. Thus, the first three steps of the CBEE model emphasize the duality of brands – both rational and emotional routes to brand building are included to the model as the ‘building blocks.’

Brand resonance on the fourth level is the most difficult and the most desirable level to reach because it can be achieved when consumers feel a deep psychological bond with brand. Brand resonance concept developed by Keller (2009), is composed of four dimensions: (1) behavioral loyalty, (2) attitudinal attachment that refers to brand love; consumers view the brand as something special, (3) sense of community that refers to interaction between consumers themselves such as online and offline WOM; and brand-consumer relationships, (4) active engagement when consumers are willing to invest personal resources such as money, time and energy beyond those resources expended during purchase and consumption of the brand.

To sum up aforesaid characteristics, brand resonance is composed by loyalty, attachment and engagement. Consumers evangelize their experience in order to persuade others to engage with it (Tynan and McKechnie 2009). In this paper, we integrate brand resonance concept into experience pyramid model to better understand how brand resonance occurs.

Method

In order to understand the consumer-brand relationship in depth, a qualitative approach was applied. As an experience is perceived subjectively and through conversations we can learn about other people's experiences, dreams, feelings, and hopes and the world they live in (Kvale 1983) then qualitative approach is better data gathering method in the context of the aim of current study.

Our research team worked out theory-driven open-ended interviews to give the interviewees the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings. Face-to-face interviews were carried out in a

semi-structured manner by MBA and MA students from the Tallinn University of Technology, who participated in a marketing research course during the spring and autumn semesters in 2013 and the spring semester in 2014. The interviewers were carefully briefed before they conducted the interviews. Each student chose an interviewee from his/her social network. The material collected in the study included 64 interviews, carried out by 64 students. All in all the interviews resulted in 630 pages of data. An interview lasted on average about 40 minutes.

The interviewees included 35 females and 29 males. 19 interviewees resided abroad (in Germany, Lebanon, Poland, France, Armenia, Finland, Albania, Hungary and Brazil) and were interviewed by students of an international MBA. The rest of interviewees resided in Estonia and were interviewed by students who selected them from their social networks.

The age of the informants ranged from 19 to 36. Thus, the majority of them belong to Generation Y, the Net Generation, which consists of people born between 1982 and 1994, who have a strong sense of independence and autonomy. They have started their career; some of them are married and have children (cf. Riivits-Arkonsuo et al. 2014) They are emotionally and intellectually expressive, innovative, and curious (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh 2013). According to Napoli and Ewing (2001) brand names are important to members of Generation Y, and they tend to remain relatively loyal to a brand. Therefore, the interviewees can be seen as possessing similar patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving and expressing themselves when it comes to brand-related behaviour. (cf. Riivits-Arkonsuo, Kaljund and Leppiman 2014)

The interview data were systematically analyzed using directed approach to content analysis. The goal of this method is to validate and extend conceptually a theoretical framework (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) of the present study. In order to achieve unbiased results and increase the accuracy of interpretation the data, the interviews were read by two researchers in parallel. Using consumer experience and brand resonance concepts, the research team begun by identifying key notions as initial categories. The categories that emerged in the systematic and, at the same time, innovative reading process were carefully compared with the theoretical models on which this study is built.

Findings and discussion

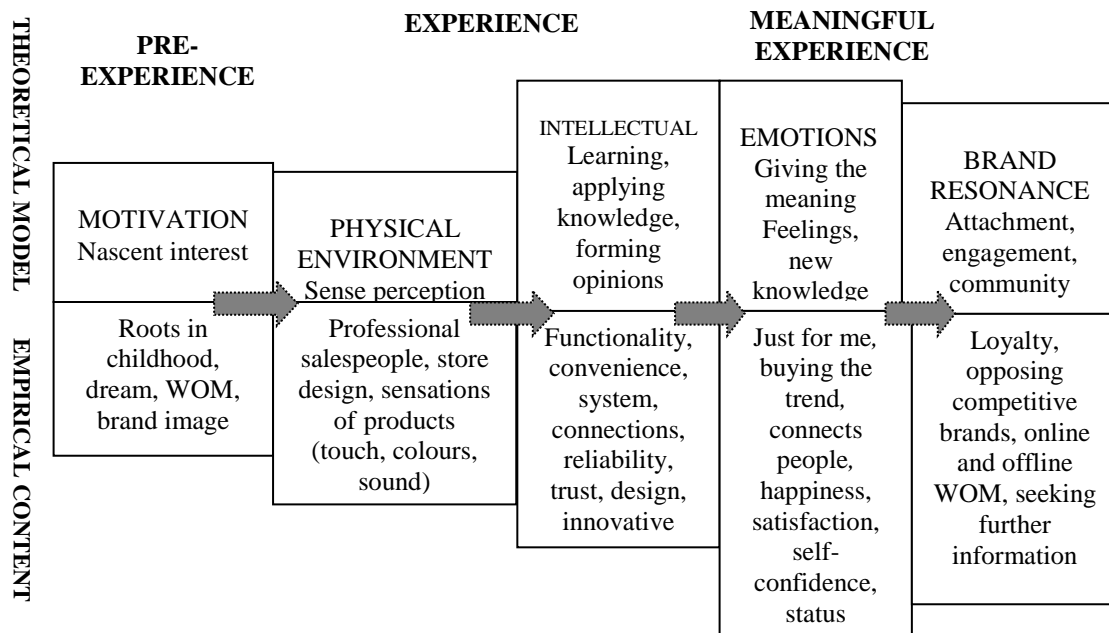
In-depth interviews with people belonging to Generation Y demonstrated that if the informants were enabled to discuss their favorite, most preferred and loved brand, then the most often talked-about brand categories were eight technology brands, five premium car brands, four confectionery brands, four clothing, and three sports equipment brands. As the technology brands emerged the most often talked-about brand category then we focus now on analyse how these brands obtained a meaning for the consumer. The interviews on technology brands included two females and six males. Three interviewees resided abroad (in France and Armenia), five in Estonia.

The qualitative directed content analysis enabled us to work out reconstruction the consumer's journey from the first encounter with technology brand to the meaning giving that makes the relationship with the brand emotional and, triggering the wish to seek further information and share the experience. We integrate the dimensions of the experience pyramid (Tarssanen and Kylänen 2007) and the brand resonance (Keller 2009). The findings from a directed content analysis offer supporting evidence (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) for the above mentioned theoretical approaches. The results are presented in Figure 1.

We consider how the interviewees talk about their first encounter with the brand, and observe the way they perceive their journey to establishing a close emotional relationship with the brand through various levels of experience. Three out of eight interviewees became acquainted with

their brand (Samsung, Sony) already in childhood. They dreamed about their TV to play videogames or their mobile phone of famous brand. They received their first technology equipment as a gift. Such childhood memories often include a high positive emotion related to the first experience. Even if the memories of the first encounter do not go as far back as childhood, the emotion present in them is equally strong. Apple (pink Ipod mini) was *tried* because *one of my friends had it*.¹ Thus, a firm consumer-brand relationship manifested itself as the positive consumer-to-consumer WOM communication. Brand image (Apple, Samsung) plays an important role; the informants knew that brands are known because of high quality: *I thought the quality was really good, and I decided to buy*. The interviewee whose favourite brand is Samsung has done her *own research* to clarify the details and she *simply just like this brand*.

Figure 1 Reconstruction the consumer’s journey – technology brands



The physical level means an environment for the experience. The interviewees emphasized the importance of the professional salesperson:

- *The salesman asks you if you need something and are not loud [Apple]. Salesmen are convinced people; they wear simple clothes and this is a very good sensation: Buying high quality products, in a simple way, discussing simply.*
- *The personnel were kind and very clear in communication [Samsung]. Therefore everything was transparent. I think, they were very honest with me.*

On the physical level, the consumer experiences and perceives the product through the five senses. The interviewees described experiences related to colours (white neutral colour of Apple, blue colour of Samsung), sounds, touches (buttons on touch screen), the beautiful display of goods in the store, and the stylish design of products. An Apple store offers an almost complete

¹ All quotes are focused on technology brands

multisensory experience: one can touch the products, listen to music there, and be surrounded by extraordinary interior design.

The intellectual level means learning, thinking, applying knowledge and forming opinions. The keywords that emerged from interviews are functionality, working system, convenience, and reliability: *The whole system [Apple] is easy to use. All functionalities are grouped. The system Iphone – Ipad – Imac creates a unique simplicity to use, everything is synchronized.* Another interviewee told: *I think it is reliability [Apple] that attracts me mostly.* Interviewees admired the design of their brands: *its design [Samsung], it is always new and exciting.*

The meaningful experience is experienced on an emotional level. On this level, the experience becomes meaningful an emotional connection to the brand is developed. The consumers see their brands meaningful, sometimes like made for them: *It all seems [Apple]... somehow as if it were made for you.* The brand may also boost the self-esteem, provide satisfaction, self-confidence even happiness: *Using this brand [Samsung] makes me feel self-confident and safe, I feel myself like being in a trend. Yes, it connects me with a community of people with similar preferences and with the same opinion about this brand.* To illustrate a case how brand makes consumer happy we present here an example:

Samsung's mission is to bring success and happiness to its clients and customers. So I'm happy and I like it.

An experience becomes meaningful, and the devoted consumer feels the need to speak about it in an emotional and colourful way to his friends, and share the experience in social media channels. That is, such consumers pass on brand-related messages and generate online WOM content (Riivits-Arkonsuo and Leppiman, 2013): *It is in my interest list in Facebook, sometimes I check their Internet-store. I also follow news about Samsung's new product launches and I might buy them if I like. I also have some other products of this brand such as a TV, computer*

They emphasize the loyalty: *But for my last purchase I've already told that I have been using this brand [Samsung] for so long that it has been very easy to make a choice and decide.* Once they have become interested in their 'own' brand, they start to read about it and seek out further information about it. On this level, the brand resonance is achieved.

The findings demonstrate that the experiential brands have achieved the brand resonance – enhanced attachment, community and engagement. Consequently, a foundation on which brand resonance is built has been solid (Keller 2009). According to Keller's model, Samsung is a salient brand:

When I was a little boy and I heard about Samsung, I knew that it is going to be one of my favourite brands... And, surprise, that's what happened!

The young man gladly expressed his feelings about his experiences in Apple stores – experiences that gave him the strong, gripping feeling that it is made just for him:

You have the possibility to touch and try everything first hand. It all seems ... somehow as if it were made for you.

Such expression of feelings demonstrates Apple brand resonance in the attitudinal attachment dimension – brand is something special, made just for certain consumer. Some of the informants used opposing competing brands that is typical for the brand evangelists (Doss 2014, Riivits-Arkonsuo, Kaljund and Leppiman 2014):

Leica preserves its spirit and has a long history, doing the same thing in a minimal but beautiful manner – it's brilliant! Sony, Canon, Nikon ... those systems change and they change fast, they concentrate on functions, not on simplicity.

Apple brand resonance in the active engagement dimension illustrates the case where the informant revealed that he seeks information from forums he considers trustworthy and where he

expects to find answers to his questions. Moreover, we can see how a brand is pitted against other brands.

(---) I have found out a lot about their second-hand market. You can sell all their products for a very good price later. As far as I know other companies don't have a second-hand market like this. I can't imagine selling a Dell laptop after having used it! Apart from that, the Apple forums function very well, they are well monitored and you always get answers to your questions there.

Samsung brand resonance in the attitudinal attachment dimension can be illustrated by fact where the interviewee went as far as calling himself a brand importer and emphasized that he keeps his friends informed and updated about the brand. Or using majestic metaphors like *Leica is the king of cameras*.

As consumers construct experiences, they tend to refer to the elements of a product (in our case a brand) that correspond to components in the experience pyramid: the significant elements of the consumer experience are individuality, authenticity, story and interaction. (Tarssanen and Kylänen 2007). Several instances of individuality appear in the interviews; the same or similar brand/service as Apple, Samsung or Leica is not available elsewhere. Authenticity refers to the credibility. Interviewees called their brands reliable and trustful. A credible and authentic story adds significance and content to the brand. This element is also evident in the data analysed in this study: Interviewee mentioned world-renowned photographers as users of Leica cameras, while pictures of World War Two and the Vietnam War are also claimed to have been taken by this brand of camera. Multisensory perception refers to the fact that *all sensory perceptions are carefully designed to strengthen the chosen theme* (Tarssanen and Kylänen 2007). The good music and stylish interior of the Apple store have been noticed and remembered by the interviewee. Interaction means successful communication between the brand and its consumers - interviewee recalls feeling as if it were all made for him in the Apple store.

Conclusion

The study contributes to research on experiential aspects of technology brand and consumer relationships. This paper explored 1) why the technology brands form a strong emotional bond to consumers and 2) how the meaningful experience forms. A strong, meaningful emotional bond between a brand and a consumer forms if common consumption experiences turn into meaningful experiences.

The study reveals that the roots of the close connection to the technology brand among generation Y often lie in childhood. If the memories of the first encounter with the brand do not go as far back as childhood, the brand-related experiences include a strong positive emotion. The interviews in this study indicate excellent examples of the significance of multisensory experiences – design of brands; colours and touch screen support their connection to their favourite brands. The interviewees emphasized the importance of the professional salesperson and their excellent communication skills. The brands are described as high quality, unique, reliable, trustful and innovative. The experiential brand may also boost the self-esteem, provide satisfaction, self- confidence and happiness.

To answer the question how the meaningful experience forms we took a holistic look at the consumer experience. We used the logic of the experience pyramid (Tarssanen and Kylänen 2007) and the brand resonance model (Keller 2009) to analyse the content of interviews, beginning with the motivational level where the brand first catches the interest of the consumer, moving on to the physical level where he or she actually encounters the brand, and then to the level of experience where it becomes apparent whether an emotional connection to the brand is

developed or not. If the emotional connection appears, the brand has become experiential; it has obtained meaning for the consumer. The experiential brands have achieved the brand resonance – enhanced attachment, community and engagement. A strong emotional bond to the brand triggers the wish to share the experience either face-to-face or on social media channels. Moreover, once one has become interested in the brand and is aware of this interest, one may begin to read about it and seek out further information.

Limitation and Further Research

The collected data depended on the communication skills of individual interviewers, which varied, thus accounting for some loss of potential data, for example through lack of previous interviewing experience. This resulted in difficulties for some interviewers in maintaining a smooth discussion, some forgetting to treat the interview script as a flexible guideline, while others could be seen at times to be using suggestive or leading language in their questioning, resulting in the answers to these questions being eliminated from the study. The risk of using students as interviewers was justified in terms of the fact that it facilitated access to a wide circle of Net Generation consumers. (cf. Riiivits-Arkonsuo, Kaljund and Leppiman 2014).

We assume that current findings have implications for future work. Technology brands are not the only experiential brands. Our study findings revealed that beloved and most-talked brands are automotive, confectionery, clothing, and sports equipment brands. Further research could provide the empirical evidence between meaningful experience and the behavioural consequences related to brand above mentioned categories. For the extension of this research could construct the consumer experience model.

Managerial Implications

How might producers and marketers design their brand as experiential? To answer this we must return to the findings of the study: What distinguishes a meaningful experience from other experiences? The information that the interviewers have sought out and found; for example, through the Apple forum (which is perceived as trustworthy) or from reading about the history of Leica (which is perceived as a success story), is effectively integrated into the narrative that they have of the brand. Marketers can make use of all these values in their brand communication. Besides that, a good brand offers a story. The sensorial component has been shown to constitute the most important part for several experiential brands (Gentile, Spiller and Nocci 2007, Schmitt 2010). Our research reveals that the feelings related to the sensorial are strong and important. The set of multisensory elements that the brand and its sales locations offer, as well as the service which the interviewers perceive as individually tailored and excellent, make them feel special and amplify the feeling that something about the experience (for example the service or the interior) is made just for them, strengthening the bond between the consumer and the brand.

The concept of designing experiences can be consciously used in brand building and integrated into marketing communication for various products and services.

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