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Results of a multiple-case study

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Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Conference Proceedings of the Design Management Academy

Citation (APA)

Bakker-Wu, S., Calabretta, G., & Hultink, E.-J. (2017). How is brand experience designed in practice? Results of a multiple-case study. In E. Bohemia, C. de Bont, & L. Svengren Holm (Eds.), *Conference Proceedings of the Design Management Academy : Research Perspectives on Creative Intersections* (pp. 1213-1225). (Conference Proceedings of the Design Management Academy; Vol. 4). Design Research Society.

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How is brand experience designed in practice? Results of a multiple-case study

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doi: 49

Brand experience is an important concept in marketing because it can affect brand loyalty, brand recall, and brand attitude. Brand experience design is therefore an important practice for companies to create favourable and meaningful experiences, through the design of various touchpoints that are in line with the brand values. This paper presents a multiple-case study of brand experience design in practice. Our results suggest similarities and differences between product design and brand experience design processes. Furthermore, we suggest that reciprocal influences may exist between the brand and touchpoint design. We also provide insights for managers and designers to not only use logical reasoning but also other capabilities to design for brand experiences. Finally, we identified the limitations of our study and interesting areas for future research.

Keywords: brand experience design, touch point design

1. Introduction

Brand experience (BE) is an important concept in marketing because it can affect brand loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011; Shim, Forsythe, & Kwon, 2015), brand recall (Baumann, Hamin, & Chong, 2015), and brand attitude (Chang & Chieng, 2006). Design serves as an important practice for creating intense, integrated brand experiences (Kent, 2003). This paper presents a multiple-case study of BE design in practice which sheds light on some unique aspects of BE design comparing to common product design process, in particular how the brand interacts with design.

The power of a brand lies in what consumers have “learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time” (Keller, 2013, p. 69). For example, the



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Lego Group does not only engage with consumers through the brand name Lego, their physical product Lego bricks, but also uses the Legoland parks, The Lego Movie and the First Lego League event to build the brand. Consumers experience all these stimuli as a holistic whole and form their attitude toward the Lego brand. Brakus et al. (2009) conceptualised Brand Experience (BE) as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments.” Similar to brand stimuli, a Touch Point (TP) is defined by Neumeier (2005, p. 178) as “any place where people come in contact with a brand, including product use, packaging, advertising, editorial, movies, store environments, company employees, and casual conversation”. Thus, BE is formed by consumers over time through interaction with TPs that are related to a brand.

TPs can be tangible or intangible. Some of them can be designed by the company (logo, brochures); some of them can be co-created with consumers (an event); some of them can only be created by consumers (casual conversation among consumers about a certain brand). This paper defines BE design as the design of various TPs that can be created or co-created by the company with the aim of building a brand.

The existing literature tends to address the challenges of BE design from a single aspect, such as product design, service design or brand design management. While consumers experience various types of TPs as a holistic whole, little guidance can be found about how to coordinate and design these TPs to provide customers with meaningful BEs and to help companies to build a favourable brand attitude. Therefore, the main objective of the study is to explore how to design for BE in practice. In particular, we investigated 1) how does the process look like; 2) how does brand influence TP design, and 3) what are the skills and competences used in BE design.

To answer these research questions, we studied three BE design projects in three different companies. First, our results suggest that BE design seems to follow a three-stage approach that is similar to a common design process but with some differences. Secondly, in addition to the existing literature, we suggest that reciprocal influences may exist between the brand and TP design. Finally, our results also provide insights for managers and designers on the importance of deviating from logical reasoning and complementing it with other cognitive mechanisms when designing for BE.

The rest of this paper is organised into four sections. Section 2 provides a literature review. Section 3 describes the research method. Section 4 presents the research results. Finally, Section 5 addresses discussion, limitation, contribution and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review BE design

We performed a literature review to retrieve existing research on how design is used in the creation of BE and its TPs (i.e., products, services, brand elements). Therefore, the relevant research fields are: product experience design, service design, and brand design and management.

In design research, scholars have developed many experiential concepts to help designers understand and better design for the product experience (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007). To provide clarity, these authors have introduced the framework of product experience

consisting of three levels of internal consumer responses that could be triggered through design: aesthetic pleasure (sensations), attribution of meaning (cognitions), and emotional response (feelings). In addition to these internal consumer responses (sensation, cognitions and feelings), in the management research literature, Brakus et al. (2009) have pointed out the importance of evoking behavioural responses when designing for the desired BE. BE can be evoked by the product but also by other brand related TPs, such as service. Many scholars have addressed the importance of developing specific practices for designing targeted customer experience for service companies (Berry, 2000; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010).

To reach its full potential for BE, design needs to be integrated in a number of company processes, such as the brand management process (Beverland, 2005; Stompff, 2003), the new product development (NPD) process (Montaña, Guzmán, & Moll, 2007), and the general business process (Newbery & Farnham, 2013). Conversely, the brand also needs to be integrated in the design process. Montaña, Guzmán and Moll (2007, p.829) stated that “if design is guided by the brand, it can serve as the cohesive factor for all that configure a brand experience”. Service design literature has paid more attention to this aspect and offers insights on how to integrate the brand in the new service development (NSD) process (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002; Clatworthy, 2012; Owren, 2013). For instance, the three stage Brand Megaphone model developed by Clatworthy (Clatworthy, 2012) shows how a company’s brand and customer experience development can be aligned through the creation of a service personality and the combination of analytical work and experience prototyping.

Literature suggests several approaches that can facilitate the design of various TPs in the context of BE design. Some focus on the semantic transformation –i.e., the embodiment of qualitative brand characteristics in various physical design features of a product, such as the educational approach to design physical products for visual brand recognition (Karjalainen, 2007) and the three-stage Brand Megaphone model for NSD (Clatworthy, 2012). Some emphasize more the integration of the brand in the design process, such as the Brand Value Pillars Framework (Newbery & Farnham, 2013) and Brand Experience Manual (da MOTTA FILHO, 2012). Furthermore, the literature offers different approaches to transforming a brand into a product or service design. Montaña, Guzmán and Moll (2007) proposed that NPD design process should start with the development of a “potential offering” using “internal and external information and stimuli” and use brand building strategy as a guide. Karjalainen (2007) uses the “brand characteristics” from the “language domain” to create design cues of physical domain, explicitly or implicitly. Clatworthy (2012) has adapted Karjalainen’s approach for service design and introduced “service personality” as an equivalent concept for brand characteristics capturing desired strategic associations. Finally, the Brand Value Pillars Framework (Newbery & Farnham, 2013) is the only and the most elaborate approach concerning both product and service design in the context of BE design. This framework introduces the Brand Concept supported by high level value propositions as a new starting point of the design process. Then it uses Brand Attributes, that specify differentiating qualities, to develop various TPs. In this approach, the Brand Attributes are similar to “service personality” or “brand characteristics”.

Although several models are tested with students (Karjalainen’s design for visual brand recognition) or with companies (the Brand Megaphone) and the Brand Value Pillars Framework is developed based on many years of design consultancy experience, empirical evidence about how designers or brand managers actually work on BE design and how the

brand influences TP design is missing. In this study, we aim at providing insight into the BE design practice.

3. Method

A multiple-case study design is chosen since the intention of this research is to understand the phenomenon of BE design while retaining a holistic and “real-world” perspective (Yin, 2013). The sampling strategy is based on the logic of replication (Yin, 2013). Our literature review indicated that large organizations (LOs) have different approaches to brand management than small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) (Berthon, Ewing, & Napoli, 2008; Krake, 2005). For example, due to organizational structure differences, directors of SME brands may take more decisions on brand management and design than those of LO brands (Krake, 2005). Abecassis-Moedas and Benghoz (2012) found that when design capability is internal, designers seem to be more familiar with the brand values and “provide shorter lead times and reduced development costs, ... design becomes ... more a productive activity that sits at the junction of manufacturing and marketing”. When design capability is external, designers will take extra time to familiarize themselves with the brand; while the advantage can be fresh new ideas. With the aim to find contrasting results for anticipatable reasons (theoretical replication) (Yin, 2013), the companies were selected based on their size (LO versus SME) and the source of design capability (internal versus external). Table 1 provides an overview of our cases.

Table 1 Case information

Case	Firm size	Source of design capability	TP design project	Interviewee	Number of interviews
A	SME	internal	In store display	Company founder S (R) Junior designer (F)	2
B	SME	external	Website	Company creative director R (G) Creative director of design agency F (M)	2
C	LO	external	Website	Senior brand communication manager (E) CEO of design agency D (T) ; Senior designer of design agency D (E) Creative director of design agency M (H)	3

The cases are recently finished design projects of specific TPs. These are used as the starting point that enable us to investigate the relationships between the specific TP and the brand in the context of BE design. We selected the projects and identified the interviewees together with our key informants from the chosen companies. Two of the cases are about the redesigns of websites and one case is about a redesign of an in-store display. By choosing different types of TPs, we hope to find either similar or contrasting

results between the cases. To obtain a good understanding of the interplay between brand and design, both brand managers and designers who worked on the same project were interviewed.

We used semi-structured interviews to collect data. The interview guide included four topics: the description of a specific TP design project; the actual design activities; the influence of the brand on the project and the evaluation of the outcome. The interview guide was tested and optimized using a pilot interview. As preparation, information was collected about the specific TP design and company through desk research. Data were collected with interviewees in their daily work environment between October 2015 and June 2016. All interviews were taped, transcribed and checked.

We adopted the process of building theory from case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989). The first cycle coding of within-case analysis resulted in 1127 codes using a mix of methods, such as initial, in vivo and simultaneous coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Saldaña, 2015). These codes were then clustered into themes for each case. At the moment of writing, the themes were compared across the cases as a transitional step to the second cycle coding. The next section presents these preliminary findings.

4. Findings

This chapter presents the preliminary findings of our study. Section 4.1 addresses the process of BE design. Then section 4.2 illustrates the influences between a brand and its TPs. Finally, section 4.3 discusses the skills and competences of designers in this context.

4.1 Convergent and divergent process

Our results suggest that the BE design process may include three stages: convergence, transition and divergence, as illustrated in Figure 1. BE design starts with a convergent stage where broad information is collected and analysed with the aim to formulate a “Leading Principle” (LP). The LP is the transition between the convergent and divergent stage. In the divergent stage, the LP is used to design various TPs for BE.

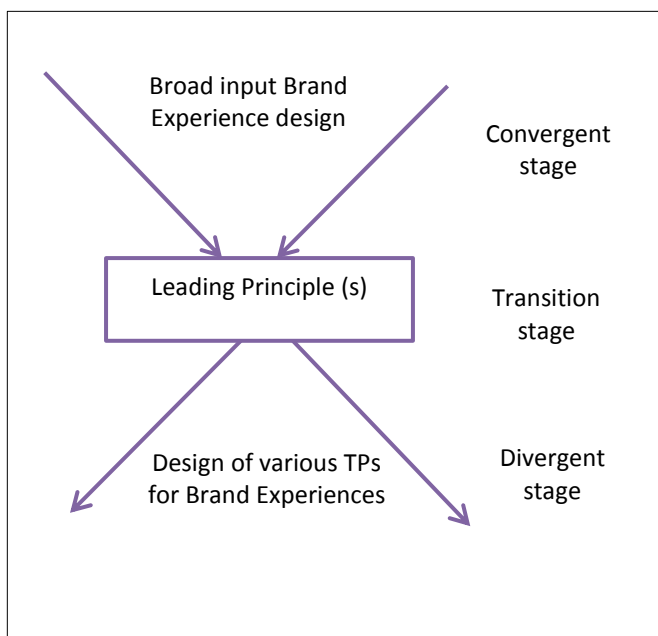


Figure 1 Three stages in Brand experience design

4.1.a: The convergent stage: from broad input to a Leading Principle.

Our results suggest that the BE project may start with the collection of a broad set of information from internal and external sources. This information addressed the past, current and desired future situation of the brand and the company.

In our cases, external sources included shop visits, interviews with consumers and examples from successful brand TP designs. Internal sources were used to gather strategic and organizational information about the brand, existing TPs' designs, design guidelines, target customers, strategies and organisations. Information about the brand included brand values, brand identity or brand DNA, brand perception, and brand image. Existing designs included the product, packaging, displays, website design, magazines, and catalogues. Two interviewees called them "brand manifestations". Brand design guidelines included the look and feel of the brands, font, material, form, photography and requirements. In case B, the Creative director of design agency F described strategic and organisational information as follows:

It is about the positioning in the market, and how they perform against competitors and how differentiating you are in the category, where you can excel or where you can differentiate.

Our interviewees used different terminologies, such as "brand DNA", "brand pillar" or "brand identity", to refer to the brand characteristics that needed to be translated into a TP design. For example, the Creative director of design agency M explained "brand identity" as follows:

Brand identity is more (about) how the brand behaves, what the brand is and why. That is, of course, very clear in (relation to) competition, target market and what is the identity of the organization.

All this information was provided in a large variety of forms and purposes (e.g. textual, verbal, visual information, descriptive or inspirational) and transferred to designers through different channels (e.g. a written document or interaction between the client and the designers). In case B, the client conveyed brand values to the designers through workshops. In case C, even "a whole cross-section of the organization" was interviewed to "read the organisation" or to gain input for the BE design, CEO of design agency D recalled:

(The designers) can "breathe in" what they think of the project and the client. That's not the same as the written briefings, but (information) comes in in another way.

The designers used both their analytical skills and intuition to create a LP based on the analyses of information. In case C, the LP is used to explain "how" to translate strategy or brand characteristics into a design. The Creative director of design agency M (case C) explained:

In between, (there) is a kind of transition... Those (LPs) are kind of design principles that tell the design team how we translate the highest level (strategy), to (a) tangible design, so that the design will actually support

(the strategy). ... From this (strategy) level to the lowest (design) level is very difficult, so we always prepare the design principles.

In case C, the CEO of design agency D, responsible for brand design, explained the LP as “everything that is strategically important, is packaged in a tiny expression”. Meanwhile, the “LP is also found in everything, it is also a design principle which sits in all facets of design” (Creative director of design agency M, responsible for website redesign). Therefore, defining a LP seems to be the transition stage between the convergent and divergent stage.

One challenge in defining LP was the conflicting requirements or paradox that were found in all cases. In case C, the LP was defined based on the paradox of using one service to attract two different target groups (low budget vs. business customers). The senior designer of design agency D illustrated the paradox as follows:

A very important input has been that it should be both low-cost but also for business customers. That is a very strange paradox. Because on the one hand, you want to attract business customers, but on the other hand, low-cost, (it is also) for normal people.

Although our data do not provide sufficient clarity on how the LP is created, we found preliminary evidence for the fact that LP seems to be related to the emotional elements of brand positioning and brand personality. For instance, the CEO of design agency D highlighted the emotional element in this process:

We try to touch a nerve by appointing what is actually the personality of the brand? What is the emotional side of the brand? I think that always sounds a bit heavy, but we actually always try to merge content and emotion or rationale and emotion.

Compressing a large variety of information, sometimes even paradoxical requirements, into a short LP can be challenging. As the LP will be reflected through “all facets of design”, defining it seems to be an essential step in BE design. Using the emotional element of a brand in this particular step seems to be a helpful practice in BE design.

4.1.b: The divergent stage: bringing BE to life through various TPs

Our results suggest that in the divergent stage, the LP may be used to direct various TP designs with the aim to bring BE to life in a consistent way. For instance, the senior brand communication manager from case C explained:

(In this case,) you give the service employees the opportunity to take that responsibility, and take that space themselves to radiate (the) "Leading Principle". So provide tools to show that we are who we say we are. I think that is really the brand experience that is brought to life.

As TPs can take various forms, the characteristics of the brand are then expressed in visual design, 3D design, content, storytelling and interaction with customers. These various forms of TPs can be related to different dimensions such as time, space, and verbal. In case C, the Creative director of design agency M illustrated:

That the brand is not only the logo, but is in many aspects of manifestation...and then you get to sound. This is a very important carrier of the brand. So that's the very typical (way) of how M deals with the brand experience, thus it is translated into all kinds, in many dimensions.

The complexity in TP design may vary depending on the strategic importance of a TP. For example, designing company notepapers can be straightforward, while designing a website can be complicated. Despite the different levels of complexity and various forms, consistency across TPs is needed to ensure that the brand will be experienced unambiguously. In case C, the CEO of design agency D explained consistency as follows:

Then, it is not that (the TPs) should all be identical, because consistency is often confused with things have to be identical, ... but that's just boring. You have to bring the specific (value) to life. So machine looks like this, product, packaging, online, then all (TPs) have to exhale the same spirit.

Our results suggest that BE is brought to life through the use of a LP that ensures consistency across the design of various TPs in multiple dimensions.

4.2 Reciprocal influences in BE design

During the BE design process as described in section 4.1, the brand and TPs may have reciprocal influences and the design of one TP may influence the design of another, Figure 2 illustrates two types of influences, which will be discussed next.

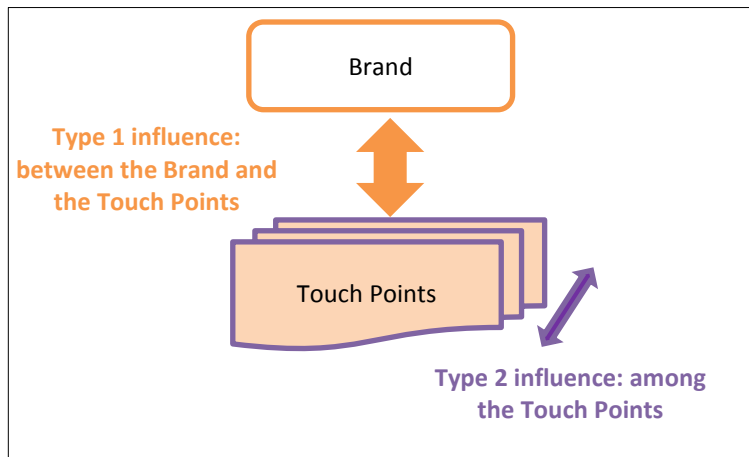


Figure 2 Influences between Brand and Touch Points in Brand Experience design

4.2.a: Influences between the brand and TPs (type 1)

Our results suggest that reciprocal influences between the brand and TP design may exist in practice.

First, brands can direct TP design. In case B, the design agency F successfully redesigned the website using brand related input. In case C, the CEO of design agency D believed that TPs could not be designed before the brand was defined, and “... *you should be working from the principle* “. However, the other two interviews revealed that the need to redesign the brand had emerged during the website redesign project. Two design agencies have consulted each other to design the brand and de website in parallel. The Creative director of design agency M recalled:

This was the first collaboration with design agency D. We had to get used to each other yet. We are two DNAs. It took a few weeks, but it went actually quite fast. It actually became a very good cooperation.

In case A, the youngest brand in the sample, we found that TP design helped to define the brand, the Company founder S explained the process as follows:

And whatever you notice with brand definitions, as long as it is abstract and only in words, it is difficult. At a time when you are going to translate it into a product, such as display, brochure or a website then it becomes concrete, you can easily say this material or that material, this shape (fits well) and that shape does not. You get a kind of reversed engineering, ok this is our brand, this is our identity.

An explanation may be that when designing a new TP, especially for a young brand, designers need to make design decisions related to a specific new dimension. For example, the first website design will require designers to think about how to interact with consumers through the interface according to the brand characteristics. By making these decisions, designers create new facets of the brand, which can influence or add new characteristics to the existing brand.

4.2.b: Influences among the TPs (type 2)

Our results suggest that in the BE design practice there may be interdependences in the design of the different TPs. First, it seems that BE design may follow a sequence in the design of the different TPs, where the starting point is represented by the TP with a more prominent role in terms of generating business value and/or determining the customer journey. In cases B and C, the website was an important sales channel and played an essential role in the customer journey. In case C, the Creative director of design agency M suggested that “the digital TPs are leading now. Starting from there, you go to the offline TPs.”

Instead of online TPs leading offline ones, a reversed sequence is found in case A where the product was considered to be the most significant TP. The sequence of TP optimization was: product, packaging, display and website. An explanation of this sequence may be that there is a learning effect in TP design according to the Company founder S:

Yes, for website you learn from your brochure and your display, (also) for your website, you learn from your product sell, and everything is interconnected.

TPs can be designed in sequence but also in parallel. In case B, online (website) and offline (shop in shop) purchase environments were closely related. The Company creative director R recalled:

I have done two projects together, both shop-in-shop (and website) ... Because what I believe is that these two things, must be connected to each other.

Based on these results, we suggest that brand managers or designers should be aware of and analyse the interrelationship between the TPs, the importance of one TP in relation to the others and if possible make use of the learning effect.

4.3 Designers' skills and competences

Our results suggest that designers may need to have the skills to use a broad range of generic design tools in BE design. In case B, the Creative director of design agency F recalled some of these tools as follows:

SWOT analysis, we make sometimes. We often do interviews, ... persona is actually a(nother) way, cultural probe, customer journey... in which we actually look at in what context is the customer... what questions, places, circumstances, references, feelings and concerns (he has), what is the need.

Next to these tools, designers also need to have expertise in different knowledge areas, such as “knowledge of ergonomics, marketing knowledge, knowledge of sales, knowledge of design, knowledge of construction”(case A Company founder S).

Furthermore, BE design requires designers with different background or disciplines to work together. For instance, in case C, functional and visual designers worked together on the redesign of the website.

The involvement of various people, the input from different knowledge areas, and the diversity of TPs can make BE design a complex process for designers. In order to make sense from the complexity and be able to distil a LP, designers may need to empathise with various people who can give input for the design process. In case C, the CEO of design agency D pointed out: “You must have empathy. If you do not have empathy, then it will not work.” In particular, empathic design helped designers to understand their client. The senior designer of design agency D explained:

Look, it is also a feeling and the ability to listen. But a customer can say this is good that is not good, but can we tweak that 'not good' slightly based on our intuition? Then it can be good again. That depends very much on what the customer says and how we look at it in a professional way.

Furthermore, designers also used their feelings in design and decision making. It can also be a challenge for them to communicate their feelings, as Junior designer in case A mentioned:

Sometimes I actually had a feeling about something is wrong or right, I just can't express myself well enough. ... I still find it quite difficult to put it in words.

As feelings are subjective and personal, designers can be uncertain about whether the feeling evoked by a certain design is in line with the brand. In case A, the Junior designer explained how he worked with this uncertainty:

And what evokes a certain feeling by one person can evoke another feeling by someone else. So you can never have the full 100% ...so then you need to decide if we are satisfied with 80 - 90%. Yes, this is tough, but also very nice.

To conclude, our results suggest that BE design may require the use of a broad range generic design tools, expertise in different knowledge areas, empathic design, and ability to work with feelings.

5. Discussion and implications

This paper addresses the gap between research and design practice by providing insight into the BE design practice. Similar to the literature, we found all three stages (convergent, divergent and transition) of a product design process (Hsiao & Chou, 2004; Jones, 1992). However, our results suggest that BE design may start with a convergent stage, rather than with a divergent stage as it generally occurs in the design process of products. We contribute to the design methodology literature by providing initial evidence that BE design may have a reversed process compared to product design.

Secondly, we contribute to the BE design literature by suggesting that defining a LP may be an essential step in the design process. In this particular step, we suggest that using paradoxical input may be a necessary challenge that has not yet been applied to BE design before. In line with the design research literature, the paradoxes in our cases represented “a complex statement that consists of two or more conflicting statements- true or valid in their own right, but they cannot be combined.” (Dorst, 2011 p.527). Our results also suggest that the usage of an emotional element may be helpful in defining a LP. Furthermore, our results show that designers have engaged with empathic design to reveal client’s “unarticulated user needs” (Leonard & Rayport, 1997). We provide insights for managers and designers to use not only logical reasoning but also emotions, feelings and empathy in the context of BE design.

Lastly, in the existing brand management and service design literature, brands serve as the starting point of the design process (e.g., Clatworthy, 2012; Montaña, Guzmán, & Moll, 2007). We contribute to the literature by providing initial evidence of a reverse logic, where a company used the design of TPs to iteratively define their brand.

This multiple-case study has several limitations. First, the sample size is limited, and we need to study more cases to achieve “data condensation” (Miles et al., 2013). Secondly, the analysis of data needs to be validated by asking a colleague to recluster the codes and discover potential new themes. Finally, a more extensive literature review is necessary to better relate findings to the existent literature and shed light on how to apply the existing knowledge of product and service design to BE design. Interesting directions for future research can be how to apply paradoxical thinking in defining a LP and how to use feelings and empathy in the BE design process.

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