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From understanding to crafting: A framework for developing visual brand experiences

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ABSTRACT

Brand experience is vital for companies to build strong brands and foster favourable consumer outcomes. Although prior research has explored its conceptualisation and consequences, knowledge on how to manage and design brand experience remains limited. We address this gap by providing empirical insights into how brands craft compelling brand experiences, focusing on the visual aspect. Using a multiple-case study, we propose a framework for developing brand experience. It consists of specific challenges and the desired outcomes, along with corresponding creation and coordination practices, contributing to synchronised ideation across a broader range of different types of touchpoints. Lastly, this study offers brand managers and designers guidance to accelerate and structure brand experience design projects.

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KEYWORDS

Brand experience; brand communication; touchpoints; design; visual appearance

Introduction

Brand experience is a pivotal research topic, impacting brand loyalty, brand attitude, brand equity, and many other consumer outcomes (Chevtchouk, Veloutsou, and Paton 2021; Davey, Sung, and Butcher 2023). It has also gained significant interest from marketers, with 59% of chief marketing officers planning to allocate up to half of their budget to it (Freeman 2017). Brand experience is formed through consumers' interaction with various touchpoints, such as products, packaging, store environments, websites, advertisements, or events (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009). As vision is the primary sense consumers use to obtain information (Hultén 2017), the visual appearance of touchpoints (hereinafter simply 'appearance') significantly shapes brand experience (Chevtchouk, Veloutsou, and Paton 2021). For instance, specific shapes and colours can create brand awareness (T. M. Karjalainen and Snelders 2010), evoke symbolic associations (Buschgens, Figueiredo, and Rahman 2020), and induce a sense of belonging (Paik and Lee 2021). As demonstrated by LEGO, well-designed and coordinated touchpoints collectively form engaging brand experiences and foster favourable consumer outcomes (Beverland and Cankurtaran 2024). So far, researchers have mainly focused on conceptualisation and consequences of brand experience, without progressing to the crafting of visual brand experiences.

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Crafting visual brand experiences, such as LEGO, has several challenges. The first is the tension between the different involved functions and the need of integrating their perspectives (Endrissat, Islam, and Noppeney 2016). The marketing and brand management function, tasked with communication touchpoints, tends to focus on exploitation activities that emphasise consistency (Beverland, Wilner, and Micheli 2015). On the other hand, the design function pursues diversification through exploration activities (March 1991). The second challenge is the absence of knowledge on eliciting desired brand associations through touchpoint appearances, which has often relied on designers' intuitive judgement, educated through years of training and experience (Crilly, Moultrie, and Clarkson 2004). Research in this domain is limited (Beverland, Wilner, and Micheli 2015). The last challenge relates to limited knowledge on coordinated creative ideation of multiple types of touchpoints (Vernuccio et al. 2022). Communication touchpoints and products are studied in an unconnected fashion. Due to differences in modality (Batra and Keller 2016) and technology used (Bolton et al. 2018), findings on one type of touchpoint may not directly apply to others. Literature on Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) already shows that differences among touchpoints have led to specialisation (Kitchen and Burgmann 2010), indicating missing connections among them. To conclude, the fast-growing number of touchpoints and the rising expenditure on brand experiences (Davey, Sung, and Butcher 2023) underscore the need for a targeted approach to navigate these challenges. Therefore, we explore the following research question: how could the appearance of various touchpoints be designed to form brand experiences that build strong brands?

Through a multiple-case study methodology (R. K. Yin 2009), we contribute to the brand experience literature by proposing a conceptualisation of brand experience design and a framework for developing brand experiences in the constellation of multiple types of touchpoints. We also contribute to IMC literature by providing empirical evidence of synchronised ideation that integrates online and offline touchpoints, stimulates collaboration between marketers and designers and introduces new ways to address the complexity inherent in IMC. This study also responds to the limited integration of IMC, brand management, and design in existing research (Golob et al. 2020).

Literature review

Managing and designing multiple touchpoints

As interactions with multiple touchpoints culminate, well-designed brand experiences can yield favourable consumer outcomes (Chevtchouk, Veloutsou, and Paton 2021; Naik and Raman 2003). For instance, packaging, advertisements, and in-store activities have a combined effect on brand salience (Van der Lans, Pieters, and Wedel 2008). IMC literature examines the management of communication touchpoints, such as advertisements or websites, and highlights the importance of integration and consistency across them (Kitchen and Burgmann 2010). Accordingly, important aspects to achieve integration include a brand identity strategy, led by a single person or dedicated team (Joachimsthaler and Aaker 1997), brand identity-oriented culture, top management support, and internal market orientation (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, and McDonald 2005). As their communication capabilities differ, Batra and Keller (2016) took a consumer-

centric view and advocated matching touchpoint capabilities to specific consumer needs and communication objectives. Furthermore, Vernuccio et al. (2022) asserted that companies should be responsive to the external environment, enhancing the participation of multiple stakeholders. As previous studies have not included products or packaging, which are considered a brand's primary communication vehicle (T. Karjalainen 2007), a holistic view of how to manage a broader range of touchpoints is absent.

Research on managing creative activities for multiple touchpoints is limited and has mainly focused on interaction and multisensory aspects. Motta-Filho (2021) investigated how to create interaction for service touchpoints, including service employees and help desks. He proposed a manual to establish a clear understanding of a brand and to support interaction design congruent with that brand. Furthermore, Endrissat, Islam, and Noppeney (2016) investigated the management of the creation of olfactory and visual touchpoints, demonstrating that images presented as a mood board can serve as a reference point when developing a new fragrance, its packaging, and its campaign. These tools have not focused specifically on the visual aspect, leaving a gap in understanding how to manage creative activities across multiple touchpoints.

Designing visual appearance

Visual appearances of touchpoints significantly shape consumers' brand experiences, however studies on designing touchpoint appearances remain limited. One approach is the semantic transformation (T. Karjalainen 2007). It identifies and employs key car features, such as BMW's kidney-shaped grille, to evoke desired associations and enhance brand awareness. In another approach, shape grammar, McCormack, Cagan, and Vogel (2004) analysed the front view of historical Buick cars and encoded brand associations into a set of design rules which were used to generate and modify a wide range of three-dimensional car forms. For communication touchpoints, experts recommend incorporating graphical elements such as logos, colours, and fonts (Wheeler and Meyerson 2024). Lastly, Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) technologies have developed tools such as Midjourney and DALL-E to automatically generate advertising images (Chen et al. 2024). Although these tools generated visuals at high speed and sometimes with high quality, controlling prompts to achieve desired outputs remains challenging (Park et al. 2024). Given the differences in design dimensions, it is unclear how existing approaches, either specific to cars or communication touchpoints, can be applied across different types of touchpoints.

Brand experience is also the result of consumers' interactions with different generations of touchpoints over time (Chevtchouk, Veloutsou, and Paton 2021). Maintaining a certain level of consistency between current and previous appearances is essential for brand recognition and acceptance (Person et al. 2007). When brands respond to shifting sociocultural expectations and emerging consumer needs (Beverland, Wilner, and Micheli 2015), product appearances must change to elicit new brand associations (T. M. Karjalainen and Snelders 2010). For incremental changes, Beverland, Wilner, and Micheli (2015) suggested selecting design features that can introduce new, non-conflicting associations. For radical changes, scholars highlighted the importance of experimentation (Ravasi and Lojacono 2005), incorporating a design mindset (Beverland, Wilner, and Micheli 2015) and gaining input from a network of external

partners (Verganti 2008). These studies mainly focused on products, leaving a gap in understanding how to evolve other types of touchpoints to shape brand experiences over time.

Prior studies have examined the partial aspects of brand experience design, such as managing communication touchpoints and designing products. The management of creative activities has not specifically focused on the visual aspect, and the existing design approaches of appearances can not be readily applied across different types of touchpoints. To conclude, knowledge of coordinated creation (Vernuccio et al. 2022) remains limited. Specifically, there is a gap in understanding how to manage creative activities and design appearances across multiple types of touchpoints.

Method

The explorative nature of the research question favours a multiple-case study design (R. K. Yin 2009). To avoid researcher bias and to discover more profound or unexpected findings (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2012; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2013), we used a two-stage approach. Stage 1 included semi-structured interviews with informants who worked on brand experience projects for leading brands. Following the approach of a similar study (Beverland, Wilner, and Micheli 2015), Stage 2 included interviews with informants to consolidate our preliminary findings.

Case and informant selection

We employed theoretical sampling (R. K. Yin 2009). We identified leading brands in several industries and selected those that employed brand experience design for brand building. The selected cases differ in their brand strategies (e.g., brand positioning and target groups) and visual styles. Stage 1 informants were identified through our network. We selected informants with two distinct roles in achieving touchpoint integration: brand strategists who ensure alignment between brand identity and business strategies (e.g., marketers or brand managers) and brand stewards who ensure consistency between brand identity and creative execution (e.g., graphic designers) (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, and McDonald 2005). In consultation with brand strategists, we selected projects that were recently completed, significantly impactful on brand experience, and involved various types of touchpoints. In Stage 2, we selected another five informants with expertise related to the themes from Stage 1. Tables 1 and 2 present details of the cases and informants.

Table 1. Case details.

Case nr	Industry	Pre-selected projects as the starting point of interviews:
A	Fashion	In-store display
B	Sports	Website
C	Aviation	Website
D	Consumer electronic goods	Product, packaging

Table 2. Informants' details.

Stage 1					
Informants nr	Informant's job title	Case nr	Brand strategist	Brand steward	
1	Company founder	A	•		
2	Junior designer	A		•	
3	Company creative director	B	•		
4	Creative director, design agency F	B		•	
5	Senior brand communication manager	C	•		
6	CEO, design agency D	C	•		
7	Senior designer, design agency D	C		•	
8	Creative director, design agency M	C		•	
9	Head of design of brand, communications and digital	D	•		
10	Creative director product design	D		•	
11	Global creative lead	D		•	
Stage 2					
Informants nr	Expertise area				
12	Design techniques				
13	User experience design				
14	Design research				
15	Integration of design skills and methods in the strategic process				
16	Director of global design				

Data collection

In stage 1, we first used a pilot interview to test the interview questions and estimated duration. We refined the interview guide accordingly. We collected secondary data on the brands and touchpoints through desk research. Next, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the brand strategists and stewards separately. The interview guide used during all interviews consisted of four topics: practices for developing brand experiences across various touchpoints, the influence of a brand, the interplay among touchpoints and the evaluation of these practices. Preselected projects (Table 1) were used as starting points. The interviews varied between 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and checked. We also compared the results of earlier and newly analysed cases to secure thematic saturation (Vasileiou et al. 2018). During Stage 2 interviews, we first presented the initial results; then, we encouraged our informants to discuss, comment and assess our preliminary findings, interpretations and conclusions in relation to our research question and their expertise area.

As our data collection relied on retrospective interviews, we took several measures to increase reliability (Miller, Cardinal, and Glick 1997). We selected recently completed projects with rich information concerning our research question. All interviews were conducted in the informants' daily work environment. We triangulated the interview data by using the same interview guide for brand strategists and brand stewards. Lastly, we integrated the interview data with secondary data. For instance, we compared a particular touchpoint design discussed during the interview with its previous versions collected through desk research.

Data analysis

To analyse the first-stage data, we adopted an inductive process for building theory from case studies (Eisenhardt 1989). In the first coding cycle, the first author began by

immersing herself in the data collected from various sources and carefully reading the transcripts multiple times. Then, the first two authors coded a subset of the transcriptions separately and identified statements referring to different aspects of brand experience design. After discussing and aligning on the coding approach, the first author recoded the subset and then coded the remaining data according to the agreed approach using different coding methods (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2013). These codes were then clustered into preliminary first-order categories, and diagrams were developed to assist explanation building. In the second coding cycle, the first author used pattern coding to compare categories across cases and then developed the preliminary second-order themes. The preliminary categories and themes were then refined through multiple checks among the authors to ensure clarity and eliminate overlaps (Thomas 2006). For example, the first author initially labelled the desired outcome of a single touchpoint as 'company unique way' to capture the idea that a touchpoint needs to be unique in a way that is consistent with the brand identity. To ensure clarity of this theme, we reviewed the categories and related quotes, discussed their meaning in depth, and then redefined the label as 'distinctiveness', which conveys the same meaning more concisely and with a stronger link to the branding literature. In the third step, the first author analysed data collected from Stage 2 and used these results to develop the preliminary aggregated dimensions and the framework. This process consisted of multiple iterations, involving Stage 2 informants and all authors. The discovery of complexity levels is another example. The preliminary framework was structured into three columns, with the middle column representing components related to touchpoint generations. Informant 16 noticed that the sequence of the columns did not 'feel right'. He then swapped the columns in different ways and finally moved components related to the touchpoint portfolio to the middle. This restructuring had triggered the discussion on why it seemed to make more sense, and led us to discover the complexity levels. Figure 1 presents the data structure. Exemplary quotes for the first-order categories and explanations of second-order themes are presented in Appendices 1 and 2.

Results

Crafting brand experience essentially involves bringing a brand identity to life through all its touchpoints. To do so, all companies in our sample focused on aligning their brand identity with touchpoints, as well as the connections among these touchpoints. Our analysis reveals desired outcomes, tension fields, and practices as key components of brand experience design. As each component primarily relates to either one touchpoint, a touchpoint portfolio or generations of touchpoints, we present the results accordingly.

Tension fields

Our results indicate that companies encountered specific challenges when designing brand experiences. As these challenges consist of seemingly conflicting requirements, we labelled them as tension fields. The first tension field refers to maintaining *consistency* with brand identities while striving for *original* appearances. Our results show that each touchpoint is considered a vehicle for expressing a brand identity in a visually consistent manner. At the same time, unique

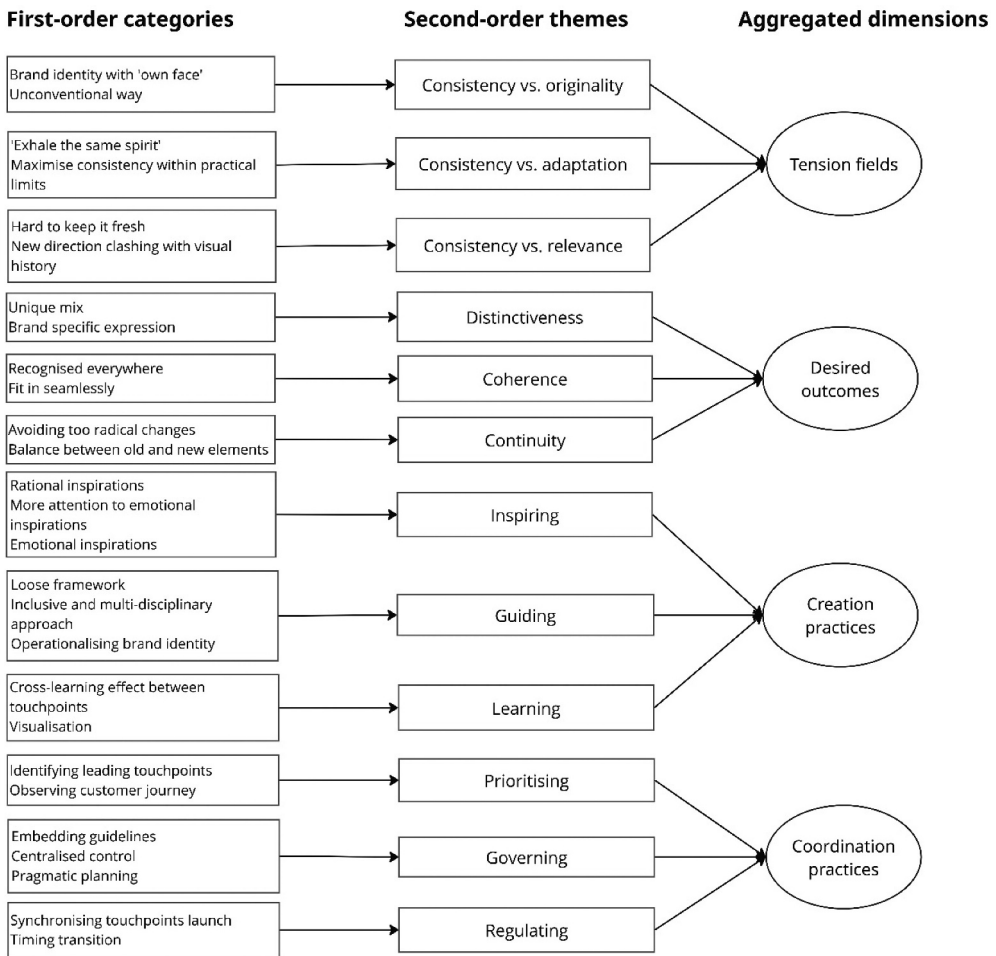


Figure 1. Data structure.

touchpoints are essential for brands to stand out and attract attention. As brand identities are already communicated through existing touchpoints and design features, the design space for original appearances becomes constrained. Therefore, developing new solutions that fulfil both requirements becomes challenging.

The second tension field is maximising *consistency* in the touchpoint portfolio while accommodating *adaptation* of specific touchpoints to particular situations. All companies made every effort to maximise visual consistency between touchpoints. However, differences in touchpoint modality, culture, market and design conventions all necessitate adaptation, creating conflicting requirements.

Then it's not that they [touchpoints] all have to be identical because consistency is often confused with things having to be identical – it's 'dead in a jar', but that's just boring. You have to specifically bring it [brand identity] to life. So the machine looks like this, and the product, the packaging, the online presence all have to exhale the same spirit. (Informant 6)

The third tension field refers to maintaining *consistency* between *touchpoint generations* while delivering *relevant* appearances during brand renewal. In all cases, the evolution of touchpoints was necessary to keep the brand experiences fresh and relevant to changing consumer needs, and aligned with renewed brand identities. However, companies also strove for consistency between the current and new touchpoint generations. The challenge is to determine how a brand's visual history can be extended into unknown but non-conflicting directions.

Desired outcomes

When working with tension fields, desired outcomes illuminate the direction of the solution. Companies strive to achieve *distinctiveness* as the desired outcome when designing an individual touchpoint. *Distinctiveness* does not refer to entirely new appearances, but rather to a unique mix of original and existing visual elements or features, resulting in specific expressions of a brand identity. For instance, the *distinctiveness* of the product in the fashion industry lies in its unique combination of common materials such as leather and aluminium (Case A). The desired outcome for a touchpoint portfolio is *coherence*. It is necessary for consumers to recognise the brand every time they interact with a touchpoint along the customer journey. As all touchpoints are used to bring the brand identity to life collectively, *coherence* refers to their appearances naturally fitting together while allowing visual differences. Lastly, the outcome for touchpoint generations is *continuity*. During brand renewal, maintaining a connection between the existing and new touchpoint generations is vital to building strong brands. To avoid disconnected changes, part of the existing brand elements and design features must be skillfully integrated into new appearances. *Continuity* refers to a balanced combination of established and new visual elements and features that sustains brand recognition over time.

Practices

Companies in our sample employed two types of practices when designing brand experiences. The first type is creation practices, which facilitate the creative process and promote discovering and developing new possibilities for touchpoints (e.g., a new display shape). The second type, coordination practices, supports the management of creative activities that optimise efficiency or effectiveness (e.g., choosing the most impactful touchpoints).

Creation practices

Inspiring

When generating ideas for an individual touchpoint, designers do not start from scratch. First, they search for inspiration. *Inspiring* entails the practice of selecting and using inspirations to stimulate designers' creativity to achieve *distinctiveness*. In all cases, designers found inspirations in their analysis of company culture, business strategy, market, and user context. They gain rational inspirations through a cognitive process based on deliberate reasoning, often drawing on insights related to brand identity as a primary source of inspiration. Informant 3 began

with the brand identity, identified inspiring scenarios through reasoning, and then specified a cinematographic style to establish the distinctiveness of a sportswear catalogue.

Although reasoning is essential, designing distinctive touchpoints is not merely ‘a kind of math formula’, as Informant 6 underlined, it is the emotional side of a brand identity that gives the ‘colour’ and the ‘character’ to brand experiences. Despite its importance, emotion is usually overlooked or treated as an afterthought. Integrating emotion from the outset, in synergy with the rationale, is crucial to enrich the design process, gain a comprehensive understanding of the brand, and ensure the project’s success.

To infuse emotion into their work, designers need emotional inspiration. This type of inspiration is gained through an affective process based on designers’ personal feelings, instincts, and impressions. Guided by their feeling, designers identify novel inspirations that resonate with the desired emotional responses associated with a brand identity. The ‘leading principle’ from Case C serves as a textual inspiration to elicit such a response. Another example is the visual inspiration in Case A.

What has helped me a lot is looking at what evokes the feeling of friendliness in me when I look at either people, nature, buildings, or products. To take pictures of that and then see what’s so typical about that thing that makes it friendly. (Informant 2)

Guiding

Guiding refers to generating and providing design guidelines that serve as predefined ‘loose frameworks’, facilitating creativity towards a unified direction. In all cases, the guidelines helped designers translate brand identity into touchpoint appearances. The first element of the guidelines includes design rules that set parameters, such as the package layout or how to apply a logo on a product, to ensure consistency while still leaving latitude for creative freedom. The second element includes inspirations and examples that illustrate design directions. They stimulate designers’ creativity, which is indispensable for adaptation across touchpoints.

To develop guidelines, an inclusive and multidisciplinary approach is adopted. In Case C, employees from various corporate layers were interviewed, and in Case D, a series of workshops was organised to establish a common ground for the guidelines. As it can be abstract, ‘trickling down’ the overall brand identity to a specific context is an important aspect.

We take the brand values, we take the business strategy of this specific category, and we translate that into what this bit means for the expression of the brand in this category. What does caring mean for a 20-year-old male looking to find shaving solutions? And what does caring mean for a young mother expecting a baby (...)? We’re looking at these brand values and putting them into context. (Informant 9)

Learning

Learning refers to practices where designers apply insights gained from existing touchpoints or experimentation to achieve *continuity* between touchpoint generations. When creating a touchpoint, designers engage in an iterative process, generating many ideas and gaining learnings from testing what works. Compared to fixed features, learnings drawn from the design experience can be utilised more

freely across various types of touchpoints. This type of cross-learning seems to enhance the integration of touchpoints that differ significantly in design dimensions.

So it's by definition an evolutionary process. There's no way you can say, I'm going to start a brand, I'm going to make the ideal display, website, product, packaging. No, there's a growth process involved. You don't know in advance which shops you'll visit, who you'll meet, and what you need. (...) You learn from your brochure for your website, from your display for your website, (...) everything is connected. (Informant 1)

Another practice involves learning through visual experimentation, which seeks out unknown design spaces, tests potential solutions, reflecting an explorative mindset. It is essential to experiment with not one but multiple unknown design spaces simultaneously. In Case D, designers visualised a brochure cover and a package and evaluated how they match and collectively convey the brand identity. Ready-to-use images provide a more accessible way of visual experimentation, enabling non-designers to collaborate with designers in exploring a brand's aesthetic expression. In Case A, images from magazines and pictures of other products and brands were used as a reference point for how the brand could be expressed.

Coordination practices

Prioritising

As touchpoints vary in modality and communication capabilities, our results show that some have a greater impact on consumers' brand experiences than others. We label these *leading touchpoints*. Constrained by limited resources, *prioritising* refers to identifying and implementing leading touchpoints to achieve distinctiveness. Remarkably, a leading touchpoint is not necessarily the primary offer to consumers, and it differs per case. It can be a display (Case A), a website (Case C), or a product (Case D). As leading touchpoints are not always obvious, they must be discovered through careful observation.

Yes, you have to look at where you want to make a difference. And that's why it's so important to observe. (...) you have those 'micro-moments' where you can make a difference. You can then bet on that. If you have a customer journey and all of those micro-moments, you'll zoom in on something that is meaningful for your brand. (Informant 8)

Governing

Governing entails practices related to embedding guidelines to enable the effective realisation of a coherent touchpoint portfolio. In Case B, informant 3 stressed that the 'working method' should be 'standardised', so that designers all implement the guidelines in the same way. In essence, 'you do get a bit of robotic stuff there, but that gives you the same quality'.

In all cases, the control of embedding guidelines was centralised. It entails integrating the guidelines in the design process, providing training to designers and those involved in delivering brand experiences and monitoring the execution of touchpoint designs. This responsibility requires a flawless understanding of the guidelines and the expertise to ensure their correct application. Notably, it is not tied to a specific function.

A pragmatic approach is adopted for the realisation of touchpoints. In this way, the implementation plan of a portfolio of touchpoints can effectively support brand-building goals.

... together with him [customer experience manager], we looked at which moments in that journey are impactful and important (...) like we have to do this first, and then that is a logical next step. Then, for example, this thing would be 'nice to have', but it can also wait half a year, because it's a less important point in the journey. In this way, we've sketched the picture in time and in terms of the importance of the means. (Informant 5)

Regulating

Our results show that companies strategically managed the transition between two successive *touchpoint generations* and introduced new brand identities, logos, and (leading) touchpoints. To sustain a continuous brand experience in the long term, companies aligned these introductions through the *regulating* practice. Regulating can occur by synchronising the introduction of new touchpoints. As touchpoint lifecycles differ by type (e.g., package versus electronic product) and product category (e.g., six months for headphones versus a year for televisions), Case D introduced a new touchpoint generation at the same time to ensure a full 'window' on the new brand identity and avoid consumer confusion.

Another aspect of *regulating* is timing the transition. Brand managers often prioritise refreshing the appearances of touchpoints due to business performance pressures or competitors catching up. However, implementing new touchpoints takes time, and, more importantly, consumers need sufficient time to see, understand, and interact with them. To find the right timing, designers in Case D balanced the need for refreshment and establishment to ensure these activities support long-term brand performance.

A framework for developing brand experience

Based on the results presented above, we developed a framework for developing brand experiences (Figure 2). It presents the components in three columns of individual touchpoints, touchpoint portfolio, and touchpoint generations. As the number of touchpoints and the timespan increase, the columns reflect increasing levels of complexity. For each level, the framework visualises the typical tension field encountered by companies, the outcomes they strive for, and a combination of creation and coordination practices to navigate these tension fields and achieve the desired outcomes.

Discussion

Crafting engaging brand experiences is vital for building strong brands. Despite its importance, research has not yet focused on this topic. To address this gap, we investigated the research question: how could the visual appearance of various touchpoints be designed to form brand experiences that build strong brands? Our analysis has led to a framework that includes components that can support companies in developing brand experiences that lead to favourable consumer outcomes and internal endorsement.

By shifting the focus from understanding to crafting brand experiences, this study makes three contributions to the brand experience literature. Our first contribution is a conceptualisation of brand experience design, which entails

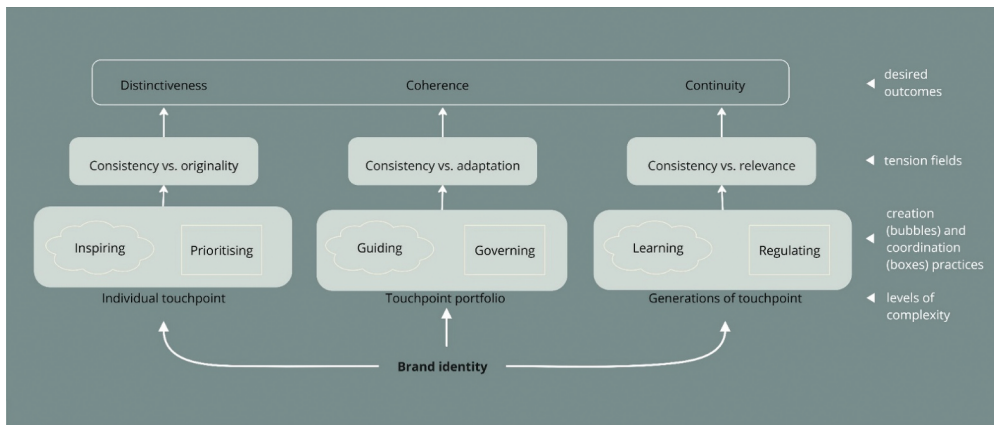


Figure 2. Framework for developing brand experience.

communicating a brand identity through the design of touchpoint appearances, with an emphasis on two key aspects. The first aspect is the need for alignment between brand identity and touchpoints, which echoes the role of brand identity in informing and guiding IMC (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, and McDonald 2005). It is not a one-directional communication, but rather incorporates the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, embedded in practices (e.g., inclusive workshops in *guiding*) and outcomes (e.g., *continuity* that sustains brand recognition among consumers), reflecting the need for balance between brand intent and consumer perspective as suggested in IMC literature (Vernuccio et al. 2022). The second aspect entails a holistic view that emphasises the connections among a broader range of touchpoints, including products and communication touchpoints that have been studied separately so far.

Second, we contribute by identifying three components of a conceptual framework for developing brand experience. Our results show that companies encounter typical tension fields and strive for corresponding desired outcomes that pertain to specific levels of complexity. Our practices are applicable to a broad range of touchpoints that shape consumers' brand experiences. Specifically, our creation practices can be used across various types of touchpoints, differing from existing approaches (e.g., T. Karjalainen 2007; Wheeler and Meyerson 2024), which are limited to specific types. Findings on creation practices are consistent with the creativity literature, which suggests that inspirational stimuli (Sio, Kotovsky, and Cagan 2015) and learning gained through experimentation (Auernhammer and Roth 2021) lead to higher-quality solutions. Specifically, images and leading principles, as part of emotional inspiration, appear to aid designers in creating various types of touchpoints with higher visual coherence (Wu et al. 2024). Furthermore, the importance of leading touchpoints (*prioritising*) is supported by the finding that some touchpoints have more impact than others on consumer experiences (C. C. Yin 2025). Our *governing* practices extend knowledge on manuals (Motta-Filho 2021), moodboards (Endrissat, Islam, and Noppene 2016) and dedicated central teams (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, and McDonald 2005) to the management of creative activities. Lastly, our *regulating* practices reveal the coordination of touchpoint evolution, complementing

findings on product design during brand renewal (Beverland, Wilner, and Micheli 2015; Ravasi and Lojacono 2005).

Third, we contribute by exploring the relationships among the components in the framework. We observed that creation and coordination practices work in tandem to achieve desired outcomes. We discuss the complementarity between *guiding* and *governing* to achieve coherence as an example. *Guiding* stimulates the creation of touchpoints towards a unified direction through guidelines, while *governing* enables a standardised way to apply and execute them. Missing one of them, a visually coherent touchpoint portfolio is likely to be serendipitous. Tabeau et al. (2017) found that exploration enhances innovativeness and exploitation leads to better market performance; both activities are indispensable for successful innovation. As creation and coordination practices are characterised as exploration and exploitation activities respectively, we propose that the combination of them serves as a mechanism for achieving desired outcomes. Furthermore, our results indicate that tension fields consisting of seemingly contradictory requirements play a crucial role in navigating the complexity inherent in brand experience design and achieving the desired outcomes. Indeed, Reiter-Palmon, Leone, and Schreiner (2023) showed that identifying such requirements helps to tackle complexity and contributes to higher-quality solutions. Our results also suggest that some practices that reflect a design mindset are particularly useful for navigating tension fields. Prior studies showed that adopting a design mindset is key to resolving tension fields (Brown 2008), especially those typical for brand innovation (Beverland, Wilner, and Micheli 2015). Practices reflecting such a mindset include a holistic perspective, anchored in careful observation of the customer journey (*prioritising*), inclusive workshops (*guiding*), and an exploratory mindset in experimentation (*learning*). Therefore, we propose that integrating a design mindset, along with tension fields, will mediate the effect of practices on achieving desired outcomes.

Our study also contributes to IMC in several ways. First, we contribute to the integration of visual appearances of online and offline touchpoints by providing empirical evidence of synchronised creative ideation, which is currently absent (Vernuccio et al. 2022). Our findings on *guiding* and *learning* can be applied flexibly across touchpoints that differ in design dimensions (e.g., websites and packaging). Our coordination practices extend findings on the management of communication touchpoints (Batra and Keller 2016; Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, and McDonald 2005) to the management of creative activities. Second, these practices also introduce a novel approach to cultivating a collaborative culture that effectively creates IMC (Porcu et al. 2020). Specifically, the inclusive workshops (*guiding*) and experimentation with ready-to-use images (*learning*) enable marketers and designers to establish a shared reference point and convey an abstract brand identity with clarity and richness, thereby reducing the ambiguity designers often face (Crilly, Moultrie, and Clarkson 2004). Lastly, prior research has identified managerial and organisational barriers that complicate the implementation of IMC (Vernuccio et al. 2022). We contribute by uncovering that adopting a design mindset and integrating tension fields can support navigating such complexity.

Our framework offers guidance for practitioners, including brand strategists such as CMOs, brand managers, marketers, and communication managers, as well as brand stewards like graphic designers and advertising agencies. Dealing with a multitude of touchpoints simultaneously without a starting point can be overwhelming.

Experienced designers 'only start working toward a solution once the nature of the core paradox has been established to their satisfaction' (Dorst 2011). Our tension fields accelerate brand experience projects by illuminating the essence of design paradoxes. Furthermore, complexity levels help to identify the starting point of these projects and select the appropriate practices. Lastly, for digital-only or start-up brands that rely on data-driven updates of touchpoints or AI-generated content and visuals, maintaining an optimal level of visual consistency to foster consumer trust may become more critical (Shams, Chatterjee, and Chaudhuri 2024). As regularly assessing *coherence* is demanding, computer vision (Li, Lee, and Blasco-Arcas 2025) can be a useful tool for *governing*.

Limitations and concluding remarks

Given its qualitative nature, this study does not provide confirmatory evidence on whether the proposed framework leads to positive consumer outcomes. Future research can develop scales to measure the integration of a design mindset and tension fields, desired outcomes, and employment of practices to clarify the underlying construct and inform the effectiveness of the framework. Second, we conducted interviews, but did not observe brand experience design over time. Future longitudinal studies can be conducted to investigate how companies advance through increasing levels of complexity. Lastly, we focused on integrating various types of touchpoints. Our findings may not provide sufficient insight for digital-only brands without any physical touchpoints (e.g., products or packaging) or (co-) created touchpoints by consumers or other stakeholders (Ind and Schmidt 2019). Additional studies focusing on these contexts may help establish the framework's boundary conditions.

Brand experience is a powerful tool for brand management. For the first time, we present a framework that incorporates novel components to support the holistic development of visual brand experiences, thereby addressing the gap related to coordinated ideation across a broader range of touchpoints. It empowers brands to create compelling experiences and opens avenues for research in this nascent but important field.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethical statement

All participants were informed of the study's purpose and how their data would be used and stored. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews, and all identifiable information about the participants and their companies was anonymised.

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