SERVICE BRANDING: OPERATIONALIZING A CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE CENTRIC APPROACH TO BRANDING

ABSTRACT

This paper builds on the intersection of Service Design, Service Dominant Logic and Branding to introduce the concept of Service Branding as customer experience centric approach to branding. It is argues that as the locus of value co-creation shifts towards the use-interactions, and with the growing role of the customer experience in the development of competitive advantage, branding practices should shift their focus towards the development of brand-based customer experiences. Branding practices have evolved in line with the concept of brand – from identifiers of products, brand are now seem as the outcome of the collective stakeholders' perceptions emerging from their interaction with the brand. Branding has thus evolved from labelling, towards multi-stakeholders approaches that aim as delivering superior customers experience by bridging internal and external values closer. Yet, recently, there has been a move towards the development of the enablers of the service interaction – which also include supporting the employees in performing their functions.

Building on the concept of Semantic Transformation, this paper proposed a framework for implementing Service Branding. It argues that the first step is to develop an experiential expression of the brand – a Brand Experience Proposition – that can be used to inform the design process. From that stage, it is suggested that the design teams should focus not only on devising the desired customer experience with the brand, but also focus on the development of the service prerequisites – the processes, systems and interfaces that support the value co-creating interactions through which the customer experience the brand. In the final section, implications for practice and theory, and limitations of the proposed approach are discussed.

Key words: Branding, Customer Experience, Semantic Transformation, Service Design, Service Dominant Logic

1. INTRODUCTION

As the locus of value (co-)creation moves from exchange to the interaction between firms and customers (Prahalad & Ramaswany, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2008), branding practices must shift its focus towards the design and delivery of the customer experiences. Although the importance of the customer experience has been broadly acknowledged by literature, and its role as a leading arena for the development of a sustainable competitive advantage recognized (Gentile, Spiller & Noci, 2007), the intersection between branding and customer experience is still scantly explored, with only few academic publications exploring it.

Over the past decades the role of brands have evolved; from markers of goods, they are now seen "in terms of collaborative, value co-creation activities of firms and all of their stakeholders" (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009, p. 328). Brands emerge in the negotiations between the value proposition made by the company, which is manifested through its offerings, and the customers' experience (Urde, 2016) – they are both a cluster of values that "enable a promise to be made about a unique and welcomed experience" (de Chernatony, 2010, p.17) and the outcome of the customers' perception (Grönroos, 2007). In that sense, the customer experience mediates the brand formation process.

Additionally, developments brought by the Service Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2016) also push branding practices towards a customer experience perspective. Because value is co-created in the interaction between multiple actors, always including the user (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), and is "uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p.7), the role of the customer experience in the value co-creation process becomes evident (Sandström, Edvardsson, Kristensson, & Magnusson
2008).

However, although the importance of the customer experience (Berry, 2000) and perception in determining brand value is acknowledged in the literature (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Keller, 2013), little is said about *how* to bring the brand proposition to life (Clatworthy, 2013). Building on the concept of Sematic Transformation (Karjalainen, 2004), this conceptual paper addresses the gap between customer experience and branding from a Service Design perceptive, proposing a framework that supports the process of translating the brand proposition into the service offerings through with the customer interact and experience the brand.

2. ON THE NATURE OF BRANDS

Marketing literature defines brands from two opposing perspectives: that of the organization, which describes brand identity as a conceptual (meaning; Batey, 2008) proposition made by the organization (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000); and that of the customers, which portrays brand image as the outcome of the interactions with the branded manifestations (Semprini, 2006; Grönroos, 2007, Kapferer, 2011), which is organized as a cluster of meaning associations linked to the brand name (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2013). For de Chernatony and Riley (1998, p.428), these opposing perspective "emerge as the two main boundaries of the brand construct, setting the 'sine qua non' condition for the very existence of the brand itself".

Brands are the outcome of the interactions between the proposition made by the organization, and the customers' perceptions; they are both a source and a repository of meanings (Sherry, 2005), which are negotiated in the customers' interactions with the brand manifestations (Semprini, 2006). As a source of meaning, brands are conceptual propositions, which, in order to interact with the customers and become alive, need to be materialized through the marketing actions (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). As a repository of meanings, brands are the entity in which the customers "store" their past experience with the organization and its offerings (Kapferer, 2011).

The value of brands – brand equity – emerge from the meanings associations collectively held by the customers (Merz et al., 2009; Keller, 2013). For Berry (2000), although advertisement and word-of-

mouth play a role, customers' direct experience with the company disproportionally influences the brand meaning (i.e. customers' perceptions), and consequently, the brand equity. As customers interact with the organization, a network of meanings linked to the brand name is created, influencing their future attitudes and behaviors; if these associations are positive, this will to higher market share and price premium, and thus, financial benefits for the organization (Aaker, 1991; Kapferer, 2011). A brand becomes something more than a name when these associations are strong enough to influence the customers' perceptions (Calkins, 2005).

Accordingly, brands are conceptualized in this paper as *meaning propositions made by the organization, which ultimately reside in the customers' minds as the outcome of their interactions with the branded offerings.* Consequently, it is understood that if the organization aims at fostering the brand equity, they should focus on managing the customers' experience. Although the customer perceptions cannot be controlled, the interactions through which the customers experience the brand can. In that sense, brand management becomes the process of devising, designing, and delivering welcomed experience to the customers.

3. ON THE NATURE OF EXPERIENCE

The concept of experience can be understood from different perspectives. From a phenomenological standpoint, it refers to the "internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company" (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, p.2) – the outcome of the customers' interpretation from an interaction. For Sundbo and Sørensen (2013, p.2), "experience is something that happens in people's minds, it is determined by external stimuli and elaborated via mental awareness". Kahneman (2011) distinguishes the experiences of the living-self (interactions), from those of the remembering-self; for the author, the (lived) interactions inform our (remembered) experiences. However, contextual aspects are at play, interfering in the perception processing (ibid.; Sandström et al., 2008).

Another perspective on experience is that of a distinct type of offering, which constitutes the next stage of economic value progression (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). For Pine and Gilmore, experiences are as different offerings to services, as services are to products. While acknowledging the phenomenological nature of concept, the authors see experiences as something that are devised and staged for the customers. This implies a supplier perspective where the company is seen as an experience provider, and which is biased towards extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993) and hedonic consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), overlooking the experiences that are "common, frequent, and within the realm of everyday life" (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014, p.2). Besides, framing experiences as a type of offering ignores the role of the customers' experience with other types of economic offerings (e.g. goods and services).

Despite the limitations, conceptualizing experiences as an offering brings a third perceptive – that of the organization. Because any sort of interaction will create an experience for the customer (Johnston & Kong, 2011), organizations must become customer-centric, proactively crafting distinctive products and service offerings (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010), enabling the emergence of the intended experience to the customer. In that sense, experiences can be understood from three perspectives: as (1) a proposition made by the organization, which is (2) manifested through the interactions (experience of the living-self) that support (3) the customers' (remembering-self) experiences.

Accordingly, this paper adopts a phenomenological view of experiences that is aligned with the Service Dominant Logic conceptualization of value (Helkkula, 2011), and which understand that value (in use) is determined by the "cognitive evaluation of the service experience" (Sandström et al., 2008, p.112) through the "cyclical inter-relationship between customer service experience and customer perceived value" (Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010, p.37). Additionally, it is also understood that the organization has an active role in devising and designing the interactions that will enable the customer experiences (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010).

4. BRAND, EXPERIENCE AND MEANING

The link between brands, experiences and meaning can be explained by the role the meaning associations developed by the customers over their interaction with the organization[1] have in determining the brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Berry, 2000; Keller, 2013). Because brands *ultimately reside in the customers' minds as the outcome of their interactions with the branded offerings*, until customers actively use the brand they carry no inherent – they are merely a (meaning) proposition made by the organization. It is only through their relationships with the customers that brands become more than identifying marks (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004).

As the customers interact with the brand, they decode the meanings embedded (purposefully of not) in the qualities and characteristics of the offerings – the functional and emotional clues produced by the environment, products and services (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006) – associating these perceptions back to the brand name. Regardless of the company's intentions, every customer interaction with the brand is loaded with meanings (Batey, 2008). Hence, since brand experience is conceptualized as the customers' subjective response to specific brand-related stimuli (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009), brand experiences are not only positive or negative, but also rich in meanings.

Moreover, since brand stimuli do not necessarily require a direct interaction with the offering, brand experience does not demand consumption (Berry, Carbone, Haeckel, 2002; Nysveen, Pedersen & Skard, 2013). In that sense, brand experience can be understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses customers' phenomenological response to any type of direct, indirect (Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Helkkula, 2012) or even imaginary (Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010) interaction with the brand.

Building on the aforementioned conceptualization, and on the description of experience presented in the previous section, brand experience is defined as *the customer's interpretation of the meanings embedded (purposefully or not) in the qualities and characteristics of the offering, resulting from the perception emerging from any type of interaction*. This definition can also be explained from three integrated perspectives:

-   From the remembering-self perspective, brand experience is the customers' interpretation of the meanings conveyed through the interactions with any type (direct, indirect or imaginary) of brand manifestation.
-   From the living-self's point of view, brand experience is the interaction through which the customers perceive the meanings embedded in the brand manifestations.
-   For the company, the brand experience is a conceptual meaning proposition – a promise of a future experience that must be enabled by a cluster of integrated resources that support the value co-creating interactions (Vargo, Maglio & Akaka, 2008).

It is also important to notice that consumers are not passive; consumption is an active process (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004) through which customers the meanings proposed by the brand are reconstructed and reinterpreted (Cova, 1996; Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010). As brands emerge in the negotiations between the proposition made by the organization and the customers' experience emerging from their (direct and indirect) interactions with the company and its offerings, the brand manifestations must be actualized in order to express the right meanings, and over time, even the brand core might need to evolve (Urde, 2016), addressing the tensions between consistency and relevance (Beverland, Wilner & Micheli, 2015).

5. EVOLVING BRANDING PRACTICES

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[1] Because "an experience occurs when a customer has any sensation or acquires knowledge from some level of interaction with the elements of a context created by a service provider" (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010, p.67), every interaction creates an experience for the customer (Johnston & Kong, 2011).

As the role of brands evolve, branding practices must follow path. From marker of goods, brands are now understood as the stakeholders' collective perceptions from the value co-creating interactions (Merz et al., 2009), which are enabled by a dynamic configuration of resources (Maglio, Vargo, Caswell & Spohrer, 2009). According to Merz et al. (2009), branding practices have evolved from a product-centric era, going through image-building and a relationship management phase, finally reaching a postmodern (Cova, 1996) stage where the it focuses not only on the individual customers, but also on brand communities and all other stakeholders. Over this process, "the general focus of branding switched from brand image as a primary driver of brand value to the customer as a significant actor in the brand value creation process" (Merz et al., 2009, p.334).

This shift towards the customer experience has been not only mirrored but also strongly influenced by developments in service sector. Service brands exist at the intersection between the customers, the organizations, its employees, and other stakeholders (de Chernatony & Riley, 1998), facilitating internal, external, and interactive marketing activities that support the value co-creation processes (Brodie, Glynn & Little, 2006; Brodie, 2009). For Riley and de Chernatony (2000, p.138), the service brand begins "with the relationship between the organization and the employee providing the service, and coming alive in the interaction between the customer and the service provider".

The role of the internal collaborators, and specially the front-line staff, in supporting the customer experience has gained traction as the importance of interactive marketing practices has in shaping the customer's relationship with the brand has been acknowledged (Gummesson, 1995; Grönroos, 2004); as Berry and Saltman (2007, p.199) note, "a strong service brands is built and sustained primarily by customers' interactions with the provider". For Mosley (2007), organizations should focus on creating a shared understanding of what the brand promise is, and on inspiring the employees to act accordingly.

The assumption is that living the brand experience within the organization will facilitate an internalization process that will intuitively result in offerings and interactions that manifest the brand proposition (Ind, 2007; Stompff, 2008). Building on the concept of Semantic Transformation (Karjalainen, 2004), Clatworthy (2012) proposes a different approach by introducing a model for translating brand strategy into service experiences during the early stage of the New Service Development process. For Clatworthy (2013, p.100), there is "a general trend in services branding to move from a focus upon staff to a focus upon multiple touch-points, or 'clues'"; therefore, branding should be also concerned with the development of the enablers of the customer experience.

However, it is important to notice that a focus on the enablers of the service interactions does not necessarily ignore the importance of organizational factors and the role of the employees, as much as it acknowledges that brand delivery is not the sole responsibility of the front-line staff. At some point, all settings that support the customers' interaction must have been designed (Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). In that sense, a focus on the enablers of the service interaction comprises the design and implementation of digital and self-service interfaces as much as it does supporting the staff to do their job.

6. SERVICE DOMINANT LOGIC AND BRANDING

With few exceptions (Brodie et al., 2006; Merz et al., 2009; Brodie 2009; Brodie, Whittome & Brush, 2009) there is little literature on the intersection between Branding and Service Dominant Logic. Service Dominant Logic suggests that service – "the application of competences (knowledge and skills) by one entity for the benefit of another" (Vargo et al., 2008, p.145) – is the "fundamental basis of exchange" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p.7), and that value is co-created from the integration of resources that actors bring to the service interaction (Vargo et al., 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Therefore, the distinction between goods and/or services is rendered irrelevant.

Because value is understood as being "always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p.7), a Service Dominant Logic approach to branding is essentially customer experience-centric – it acknowledges that the customers' experiences mediates cognitive evaluation that determines the value (in use) of the offering (Sandström et al., 2008; Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010). A focus on the enablers of the service interaction is also aligned with the Service Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2016), which understands that in order to deliver the value proposition, the company must integrate the resources that will support the value co-creation process (Maglio et al., 2009).

Service Branding is thus conceptualized not as the branding of services, but as the application of Service Dominant Logic to the branding practices (Brodie et al. 2006), which aims at supporting the value co-creating interactions that enable the customers' experience with the brand.

7. SERVICE (EXPERIENCE) DESIGN AND DESIGN FOR SERVICE (EXPERIENCE)

By building on Service Dominant Logic, Service Branding proposes a customer experience-centric approach to branding. Because brands are conceptualized as *meaning propositions made by the organization, which ultimately reside in the customers' minds as the outcome of their interactions with the branded offerings*, they need to be embedded in material actions (Dumas, 1994) in order to interact with the customers, and become alive. That means that to be operationalized, Service Branding must support the development of the value co-creating interaction through which the customers experience the brand.

Although an organization cannot design the customer experience *per se*, they can "create or stage the prerequisites that enable customers to have the desired experiences" (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2011, p.65). Accordingly, the first step in managing the customer experience should be to devise the targeted perception (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994), defining what experience the organization wants to create. Once the experience proposition of the brand is known, the company must shift its attention to the customer experience management thought the systematic design and orchestration of the functional and emotional clues that influence the customers' perception during the service interaction (Berry et al., 2006).

Building on the concept of Sematic Transformation (Karjalainen, 2004), it is understood that brand characteristics are embedded into the service concept during the early stages of New Service Development (NSD) process (Clatworthy, 2012), informing the design of the service prerequisites (Edvardsson and Olsson, 1996) that support the customers' interactions. The NSD "is the overall process of developing new service offerings and is concerned with the complete set of stages from idea to launch" (Goldstein, Johnston, Duffy & Rao, 2002, p.122). Traditionally, the NSD process defined as comprising two main stages: the front end – or service design –, when service concept is crated; and the back end, where the service concept developed (Tatikonda & Zeithaml, 2002).

In the last two decades, service design has evolved into a user-centric designerly approach (Wetter-Edman, 2014; Segelström, 2013) to service innovation – as opposed to an NSD phase (Yu & Sangiorgi, 2014) – aimed at co-creating service offerings (Clatworthy, 2013) in collaboration with multiples stakeholders, through iterative and visual methods (Stickdorn, 2010). Key to Service Design practice is the orchestration of the customer experience across the different stages of the service journey (Kimbell, 2009; Clatworthy, 2013) – as Wetter-Edman (2011, p. 66) properly notes, Service Design is "inherently customer and user-centered".

More recently, Service Design relation with Service Dominant Logic has been explored as *Design for Service* (Segelström, 2013, Wetter-Edman, Sangiorgi, Edvardsson, Holmlid, Grönroos & Mattelmäki, 2014), acknowledging the indeterminacy of services as a design object (Sangiorgi, 2012), and recognizing that what is being designed is not the service itself, but a platform for value co-creation (Kimbell, 2011). In that context, it is understood that a service only emerges in the interaction between the actors and their value networks (Vargo et al., 2008); before that, the service is only a value

proposition, a dynamic configuration of resources made available to customer as an offering, which may facilitate the value co-creation process (Maglio et al., 2009).

Seeing services as platform for value co-creation implies that design processes should be concerned with devising and orchestrating value propositions that are relevant and desirable for the customers, and with integrating the resources that will enable the value co-creation process (Kimbell, 2011); in the words of Evenson & Dubberly (2010, p.404), "conceiving and iteratively planning and constructing a service systems or architecture to deliver resources that choreograph an experiences that others design". This way, Design for Service operationalizes the design of service experiences under a Service Dominant Logic perspective (Wetter-Edman et al., 2014).

8. DESIGNING FOR BRAND EXPERIENCE

Although Service Design, as a designerly discipline (Manzini, 2009), advances service development practices towards a holistic, customer experience-centric approach (Stickdorn, 2010) that is distinguishable from previous non-designerly ones (Kimbell, 2009), it has limitation when it comes to implementation. The Design for Service approach makes a clear distinction to the object in relation to Service Design. Whereas the second aims at devising the actual (ideal) customer experience, framing the service as a conceptual proposition (e.g. touch-point or journey), the first focuses on enabling the customer experience, and on the value co-creating interactions. In that sense, Design for Service responds to Service Design' shortcomings by addressing the service prerequisites (Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996), whilst not loosing touch with the customer orientation.

Design for Service thus brings an alternative to operationalizing a *Customer Experience-Centric approach to Branding*. Yet, as Carbone and Haeckel (1994, p.9) notice, "engineering an experience begins with the deliberate setting of a targeted customer perception"; that is, defining what the experience the brand wants the customers to have, or for short, a Brand Experience Proposition. The argument for the Brand Experience Proposition can be made from two points of views. From the branding side, because brands only becomes alive in the interactions with the customers, the Brand Experience Proposition can support the design teams in the development of value co-creating interactions that deliver brand-based experiences – i.e. Design for Brand Experience.

From the design perspective, brands are strongly associated with the business strategy (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000), and as such they provide a bridge between service design (i.e. design for service) and business strategy (Goldstein et al., 2002; Mager, 2009). Moreover, since brand value is grounded on the stakeholders' collective perception of the brand (Merz et al., 2009; Keller, 2013), the brand reflects the relationships and experiences valued by the customers.

9. A SEMANTIC TRANSFORMATION FRAMEWORK FOR SERVICE BRANDING

Karjalainen (2004, p.235) defines semantic transformation as "the act of encoding intentional meanings into product design elements", the process through which "qualitative brand descriptions are transformed into value-based design features" (Karjalainen & Snelders, 2010, p.8). The concept of Semantic Transformation builds on a triadic approach to semiotics, which, when applied to design, can be understood as the process where a perceivable entity (e.g. touch-point) conveys the proposed (brand) meaning to a consumer through the interpretative effect (Karjalainen & Snelders, 2010).

Clatworthy (2012) proposes the Brand Megaphone model as a Semantic Transformation approach to service. In the proposed model, the brand DNA is translated into the touch-points, tone of voice and behaviours that convey the brand, thus influencing the customer perception. In an experiential perspective this means embedding the Brand Experience Proposition into the processes, interfaces, and systems that support the value co-creating interactions (Patrício, Fisk & Constantine 2011; Wetter-Edman, 2014). As the experience of the living-self is internalized by the remembering-self, customers attribute meanings to their experience, associating them to the brand (Karjalainen & Snelders, 2010).

A successful Semantic Transformation (for Experiences) process is one that the customer's perception and the Brand Experience Proposition are aligned. Yet, it is important to notice that the Semantic Attribution process is contextual, being often influenced by individual and situational events that are beyond the control of the organization (Karjalainen, 2007; Sandström et al., 2008). This means that, in order to reduce interpretation bias due to "user's weak experience in the product category, inconsistent supporting information, or differences of cultural and social contexts" (Karjalainen, 2007, p.79), designers must understand the value co-creation process from the customers' perspective (Yu, 2018).

This paper proposes a three-step Semantic Transformation framework meant to support the translation of brand strategy into customer experience. It begins by defending the articulation of an explicit and shared vision of the experience the brand wants to deliver to its customers – a Brand Experience Proposition. Following, it is argued that Service Design can help organizations devise value propositions (service concepts) that are relevant and valuable for the customers, whilst still aligned with the Brand Experience Proposition. Finally, a Design for Service approach is suggested as a way to bridge the gap between design and implementation.

9.1 Defining the Brand Experience Proposition

Unclear brand values are one of the main reasons for distortions in the Semantic Transformation process (Karjalainen, 2007); knowing what experience the brand wants to deliver is a logical first step in the process of managing brand experiences. Abbing (2010) defends that brands must be useable by the teams that need it. For the author, in an innovation context, the brand must "suitable for use in product, service and environmental design, as well as for research and development activities", being accessible for "designers, developers, researchers and engineers using it, as a resource to develop new products and services" (ibid., p.84).

Yet, Motta-Filho (2012) argues that contemporary brand manuals are not suited for service innovation, as they are essentially directed towards the marketing departments, being too focused on corporate identity (Kapferer, 2011), and on generically defined values. In a contrasting situation, design and experience manuals were also considered unfit, for they are too specific, covering mainly environmental guidelines as a type of tridimensional corporate identity. As such, there is a need to structure the brand in an experiential perspective through a Brand Experience Proposition that is neither too specific (e.g. focused on a single touch point), nor too generic (e.g. abstract values).

Service brands facilitate the relationships between the organization, employees and customers (Brodie, 2009). Accordingly, it is suggested that in defining the Brand Experience Proposition the organization consults its main stakeholders through a collaborative process meant to establish a balanced view of the brand that is, feasible, desirable and viable (Brown, 2009). Customers' and employees' experiences should be considered, as much as Business and brand strategy. The resulting balanced view of the experience proposition can be expressed through the metaphor of a relationship between the customers and the brand; since the brand relationships are built over the customers' multiple interactions with brand (Fournier, 1998; Gronröos, 2007), expressing a desired relationship can help convey the experiences the organization wants to create.

9.2 Devising the Value Proposition (Service Concept)

The Brand Experience Proposition should describe the experience the brand wants to create in a way that it can inform the development of different value co-creating interactions (i.e. touch-points); it should support the design teams, but not limit their capacity to adjust to situational contexts. Service Design – as a designerly discipline (Manzini, 2009) – can then help organizations translate the Brand Experience Proposition into value proposition (service concepts) through a holistic and collaborative approach that integrate different stakeholder and organizational silos into the service development process (Kimbell, 2009). Customer involvement is essential in order to understand their perspective of

the value co-creation process (Yu, 2018). At this stage, more than devising the actual enablers of the service, the objective is to create a vision for how the service should be, informing the next phase.

9.3 Developing Brand-bases Value Co-Creating Interactions

As the expression of the Brand Experience Proposition becomes more tangible, and once the details of the value proposition through which the brand is manifested are orchestrated and defined, the development of the services enablers must take place. At this stage, the focus is on what Gloppen (2012) call design management; that is, ensuring the "further development and implementation of the chosen concept at every touchpoint of the service journey" (ibid., p.14). This process requires collaboration with different stakeholders from the organization. In order to enable the value co-creating interactions, the processes that will support the service provision must be planned. From the customers perceptive, this means devising the service journey; from the company's side, this includes creating the service blueprint, integrating the different resources necessary to support the service.

Service interactions also need to be supported by systems and interfaces (Patrício et al., 2011) that deliver the core of the offering; "the configuration of actors, resources, and technology designed to enable and direct value co-creation" (Wetter-Edman et al., 2014, p.106), and the interfaces through which the customers will interact during the value co-creation processes (Secomandi & Snelders, 2011). It is thus essential that the design teams consider the internal competencies and its limitations. The design teams must thus work with stakeholders from the organization, adjusting the value proposition (service concept) to the capabilities of the organization, coordinating the integration of the adequate resources. Processes, interfaces and systems must be aligned in order to support brand-based experiences.

9.4 Value Co-Creation and Semantic Attribution

It can be said that the actual interaction with the Service is yet another (and the last) design stage in the value co-creation process. For Evenson and Dubberly (2010), services are designed during the interaction with the customer, and as such, service designers "are engaged in meta-design capabilities capabilities capabilities – designing design – and are producing resources for people to creatively engage with a service" (ibid., p.7). In other words, designers devise platforms for value co-creation (Kimbell, 2011). However, the customers' phenomenological experience cannot be designed, and the evaluations of the service interactions are subject to situational influences (Sandström et al., 2008; Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010).

The same can be said about the process through which the customers decode the meanings embedded in the characteristics of the interactions – the Semantic Attribution (Karjalainen, 2007). The objective of Service Branding is to support the development of the value co-creating interactions, whilst embedding brand characteristics in its processes, interfaces and systems, enabling the emergence of brand-based experiences. In that sense, Service Branding acknowledges its own limitations in *designing for brand experience*, but it argues that in face of contemporary markets, brand should focus on a customer experience approach as a source of competitive advantage (Gentile et al., 2007).

10. CONCLUSION

Muchbach (2014, face page) argues that there is a gap between "the CMO's traditional disciplines -- brand and marketing -- and the customer experience (CX) function that represents the brand in customer interactions". As the role of customer experience grows, acknowledging the role of the customers in the value co-creation process (Merz et al., 2009), organizations must strive to bridge the gap between Customer Experience and Branding. For Clatworthy (2013, p.110), "the link between customer experience, the brand and the design process is missing when it comes to tools, methods and processes". While research on the importance of customer experience is thriving, efforts to support the

development of "tools aimed at supporting marketing managers in devising the right stimuli to support an excellent Customer Experience are still scarce" (Gentile et al., 2007, p.395).

This paper presents a contribution to branding theory by combining Service Dominant Logic, Service Design and Branding literature to propose Service Branding as a customer experience centric approach to branding. For practice, this paper introduces a three-step Semantic Transformation process that may help designers and managers translate the brand strategy into customer experiences. Finally, it is important to notice that this is a theoretical papers; although the insights presented in here are grounded on broader projects, and empirical applications of parts of the proposed model, it is acknowledged that the framework here introduced is only conceptual, and further empirical studies are needed.

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