

The Expanding Role of Customer Knowledge Management and Brand Experience during the Pandemic Crisis

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Abstract: Customer knowledge management has begun to catch momentum due to the fact that companies started to understand the importance of customer knowledge on the overall customer and brand experience even though there is no appreciable consideration in this field of research. The business impact of COVID-19 and the crisis duration have seriously affected the execution of business and the expectations of customers, therefore many companies have to reconsider their communication actions and their offers, trying to find an empathic understanding of their customers based on classical data rather than data-driven by customer knowledge. This paper aims to help specialists to connect the points between brand experience and customer knowledge model, to understand the interconnections, composition, and framework of these conjunctions. The purpose of this study is to establish a consistent relation between brand experience and consumer knowledge by exploring the direct and indirect influence of comprehensive use of customer knowledge. An adjacent target of this study is to initiate a composed set of guidelines that will help specialists ensure the consistency of the brand experience providing consensus among practitioners in this new era of experience economy where too many brands offer a poor customer experience, even though most of them argue that experience management is their top priority.

Keywords: customer knowledge management; brand experience; customer experience; pandemic crisis; COVID-19

Introduction

In the context of the pandemic crisis, many companies lost their competitive factor by overlooking a major element – customer knowledge and experience management. Customer knowledge is used by numerous corporations to monitor and evaluate the actions of customers for products and services and more importantly to promote and propose new offers or reminders (Baker, Hunt, & Scribner, 2002). By managing the knowledge of their customers, brands are more prone to observe emerging market opportunities or shifts in customer behavior before their competitors and to create a valuable economic perspective for the company, its shareholders, and customers (Jiebing, Bin, & Yongjiang, 2013).

Interconnections between brand, marketing, and customer experience (CX) disciplines have dimmed as customers gain access to companies and products on their terms. Many companies state as a business objective the approach towards customer-centricity and the commitment to deliver a consistent customer experience, in reality, they barely manage to offer a somehow authentic and evolved experience (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). What they usually do is only to streamline the user journey, making things efficient and more objective in characteristics, which is not delivering an experience that has an impact on cognitive assessments but rather an operational and functional approach (Taghizadeh, Jayaraman, Ismail, & Rahman, 2014). Companies are still not technologically or philosophically equipped to further personalize the customer experience and touchpoints based on behaviors. They still have to displace investments from traditional, expensive marketing communication into building customer connections in digital channels (Mahmud, Ramayah, & Kurnia, 2017).

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The COVID-19 pandemic highly impacted businesses in several ways, that can be grouped in four dimensions: rebuilding operations and recovering revenues, rethinking the organization, accelerating digitalization, and agile marketing (Pinzaru, Zbucnea, & Anghel, 2020). This pandemic crisis has shown us the effort that companies face in designing a consistent digital footprint and consumer knowledge-based systems. As a consequence, they aren't providing customers with integrated, seamless, digital experiences that are about interacting wherever, whenever, and through whatever medium or type of device they're using. The smart devices allow us to center the experience condition around us in a very personal way, therefore having the possibility to personalize our tools and context it drives the need for more customized product and services within those experience (Mehdibeigi, Dehghani, & Mohammad Yaghoubi, 2016).

Companies and brands need a new explicit architecture for the way brand, customer experience, and marketing link to express the company's promise. Digital transformation has altered this system and the way customers expect, connect, relate, and react with brands (Taherparvar, Esmaeilpour, & Dostar, 2014). People are still in need of passive experience - the success of Netflix is an example of that - but there is also an increasing desire for what is described a dynamic experience, where customers drive the experience themselves, being active as a player of their experience (Mahmud, Ramayah, & Kurnia, 2017). Nowadays the last best experience that the customer has anywhere becomes the minimum expectation for the experience he wants everywhere.

Digital advancements have impacted the marketing models, making differentiation of product functions and benefits becoming smaller therefore, what is related to competitive advantages is easily imitated. The new marketing that focuses on changes judgment or perception before brand or product consideration to practical experience after purchasing has reached that point where the customization of experience has to move from memorability to immersive and participation memorabilia (Dous, Salomann, Kolbe, & Brenner, 2015). The retailing atmosphere and interaction with product and service have to move from smart functionalities given to customers to anticipative enjoyable individualization, managed to enable customers to participate in their context (Lee, Naylor, & Chen, 2011). Developing this type of experiential marketing that transforms the one-to-many touchpoints into one-to-one moments implies designing better dynamic models of customer knowledge that can easily correlate with specific dimensions of a brand experience (Massaro, Handley, Bagnoli & Dumay, 2016). Although digital and new technologies offer great opportunities for strategic and engaging digital marketing, they also come with consistent ethical dilemmas to be considered (Vidu, Zbucnea, Mocanu, & Pinzaru, 2020).

Expanding on Customer Knowledge Management

Consumer insights have represented a significant function in managerial decision making in many sectors of marketing, like brand design, development of specific advertising, pricing models, channel strategies, and media interaction (Zhang, 2011). Marketers are profoundly interested in consumer behavior learning that have the potential to improve their understanding of the brand experience and what influences the success of their marketing programs and brand equity. The importance of consumer knowledge in marketing practice has never been higher as companies struggle to adapt to a fast-changing environment characterized by the impact in the social and economic environment, highly competitive business conditions, the decreased effectiveness of traditional marketing tactics, corroborated with the emergence of new marketing tools and the evolution of savvy and more knowledgeable consumers (Zahari, Ab Rahman, Othman, & Wahab, 2013).

Customer knowledge management should be treated and analyzed not as factual data-driven about the consumer but more as a cognitive approach that is related to knowledge bound to customers and shared by customers' groups, brands, and organizational units

(Chua & Banerjee, 2013). Currently, many of the business essential activities are to understand the needs and desires of customers to streamline processes, products, and services that build lasting customer relationships and what is described as a consistent experience (Cui & Wu, 2016). Focused on the idea of collecting vast amounts of data about their customers, too often companies have not managed to properly use the data or to compose the data to design the knowledge flow inside and between the internal business processes to allocate the relevant knowledge obtained from customer-related processes to stakeholders, strategic product innovation or brand management (Aghamirian, Dorri, & Aghamirian, 2015).

The understanding of customer desires, behavior, and beliefs must be shared within the organization's business units. The model approach should be based on the who knows what question and at the same time on building an organizational knowledge system that goes beyond customer relationship management (CRM), Planning Enterprise Resource Management (ERP), or Business Intelligence (BI) tools in exchange for customer knowledge that can help specialists identify current and latent customer needs or refine the brand experience (Pergel & Psychogios, 2013).

The Customer Knowledge Management (CKM) concept was primarily supported by Gibbert, Leibold, and Probst (2002) who describe it as the strategic process by which companies and leading brands transform their customers from passive beneficiaries of products and services to empowered knowledge partners (Gibbert, Leibold, & Probst, 2002). As a learning process from which both customers and companies benefit, CKM refers to the acquisition, sharing, and expansion of customer knowledge. It can take the form of prosumerism, shared creativity, collaborative learning, communities of practice, and joint management of the intellectual property (IP) (Smith & McKeen, 2005). Early studies focused on the impact of consumer knowledge on experience, behaviors, and choice processes, which were conducted in the late 1980s, revealed that there are two known types of consumers related to information processing, evaluation strategies, and decision making. (Bettman & Park, 1980; Brucks, 1985; Johnson & Russo, 1984; Rao & Monroe, 1988). The conclusions deduced from the stated studies admit that depending on the level of involvement, there are consumers who are high in knowledge and low in knowledge (Pergel & Psychogios, 2013). The variations between high and low knowledge consumers are due to differences in cognitive hierarchies, inference, capabilities of analysis, and memory. Alba and Hutchinson (1987) stated that consumer knowledge has two significant components: familiarity, which is described as the totality of product-related experiences that customer has accumulated in time, and expertise, which is the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully (López-Nicolás & Meroño-Cerdán, 2011). Familiarity became an important factor related to product and brand experience. Higher familiarity defines a more complex, well-developed, and stable cognitive structure of consumer product knowledge, at the same time, increases customers' ability to encode and remember information (Marks & Olson, 1981; Johnson & Russo, 1984).

Knowledgeable and experienced consumers are more selective in what type of information is needed for making a purchase decision. They have a better understanding of what product/service attributes should be examined and are more effective in information search (Bettman & Park, 1980; Brucks, 1985). Knowledgeable consumers have better cognitive structures, capabilities of analysis, inference, and memory, than those who are low in knowledge level (Selnes & Howell, 1999). Experienced consumers are more qualified and inclined to search for sensory information cues, which requires more inference and domain-specific product knowledge, making them more efficient than novice consumers who rely more on written information cues. What recent studies indicate is that more knowledgeable consumers have better cognitive structures, and capabilities of analysis, inference, and memory, than those who are low in knowledge level (Du Plessis, 2007). They have faster knowledge dynamics that imply transformations from emotional and spiritual knowledge into rational knowledge (Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2020).

For specialists, CKM may appear synonym to Customer Relationship Management (CRM), or Knowledge Management (KM). What business and marketing specialists have to understand is that customer knowledge management requires a different mind-set along with several key variables (Dous, Salomann, Kolbe & Brenner, 2015). Firstly, it focuses on knowledge that emerged from the customer (i.e. knowledge residing in customers and a customer personal note), rather than focusing too much on knowledge about customers, as in the case of customer relationship management tools (Mahmud, Ramayah & Kurnia, 2017). Smart companies quickly realized that actual customers are more knowledgeable than the prospect ones. Therefore, these companies seek viable knowledge through direct interaction with their customers, in addition to exploring knowledge about customers gained by their sales and marketing divisions (Cui & Wu, 2016).

CKM improves a firm's absorption capacity. Cohen and Levinthal (1990) evaluate this as a special ability that allows companies to obtain and assimilate external knowledge and to manage and improve it internally (Belkahla & Triki, 2011). Accessing and managing customer knowledge requires a systemic and elaborate effort, as it is rooted in customer understandings as implicit knowledge (Bratianu, Vătămănescu, Anagnoste, & Dominici, 2020). Customer knowledge specialists can extract this useful information and use these particular experiences, which can become an important source of creative and innovative ideas, ensuring a competitive advantage (Zhang, 2011). Nevertheless, exchanging implicit customer knowledge (including customer information, data, thoughts, needs, experience, and issues) into explicit knowledge (like applicable insights, creative directions for solving customer problems, or developing innovative products and services) is not an easy task but an essential one for brands to master (Bratianu, 2015; Bratianu & Vătămănescu, 2017).

Focus on management of customer knowledge seen as a cognitive element, in contrast to knowledge of the customer, perceived as the classical data-driven knowledge used in the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, CK (customer knowledge), has to be considered and implemented as a dynamic process through which companies and customers alike are learning from each other (Belkahla & Triki 2011). At the same time, customer knowledge management has to be designed as a collective intelligence solution, a “genius platform” model or a modality that helps brands and companies wisely plot information and data, having a fresh customer knowledge availability which points out what is out of date or up-to-date knowledge, corroborate more connections among customer touchpoints and environments, better integration across customer moments, and suitable for assessing future customer behavior, being able to anticipate customer needs and moments of truth (Aarikka & Jaakkola, 2012).

COVID-19 has brought a new normal across every aspect of people's life - extended lockdowns, quarantine, pervasive uncertainty, sustained attention on health, and safety. All of these factors reshaped people's behavior realigning core human values and beliefs. As a result, businesses simply aren't business as usual and what previously was considered a great customer experience is no longer good enough therefore all business segments have been thrust into reorganizing their approach to customers (Mehdibeigi, Dehghani, & Mohammad Yaghoubi, 2016, p.94-103). Many in-person purchase actions have shifted to online platforms and retailers which forced the non-digitally savvy consumer to discover and integrate digital interactions in their daily routines. Suddenly, the knowledge of customer journey and satisfaction metrics regarding the wants and needs of customers has given way to an acute urgency to address what matters most to customers (PwC, 2020).

In this complex yet fragile marketing context, marketers find themselves having to engage with complicated issues about brand and customer experience. What are the most effective and efficient actions for their brands and business for staying on course? What are the proper roles for well-known marketing approaches such as “buzz” marketing, permission marketing, personalized marketing, experiential marketing, inbound marketing, and so on? How do companies decide when and in what way to increase brand

actions or to develop new product categories or approaching new market segments? More than that, how do you keep brand experience relevant and up-to-date while maintaining its heritage and sources of equity? (Mahmud, Ramayah, & Kurnia, 2017). A deeper understanding of consumer *feeling, think, act, and relate*, associated with knowledge *about, from, and for* the customer, could provide valuable guidance to address these new business environment challenges (Massaro, Handley, Bagnoli, & Dumay, 2016).

Companies with the best product or the most memorable marketing campaign do not have an advantage any more compared to those that reassessed how to empathetic engage with this new-normal customer. Particularly in crisis times, the customer's interaction with a company can trigger an instant and persistent effect on trust and loyalty (Desouza & Awazu, 2005). Companies that had built agility across functions, or engaged in proactive steps to implement consumer knowledge models and used data from existing platforms to comprehend the new line up of the customer experience where those who manage to impact relationships and customer satisfaction (Chua & Banerjee, 2013). At the same time, companies had to reframe and re-prototype their existing tools and action models to improve the way they collect, plot, analyze, and act on customer actions. Many of them were caught unawares with solutions and customer knowledge models that were partially implemented or less interconnected between channels (Aghamirian, Dorri & Aghamirian, 2015). As a general understanding of the new-normal customer, it is important to look at how customer knowledge models could be reconfigured and how to reimagine the customer experience (CX) strategy to build customer loyalty and experience (PwC, 2020).

Gebert et al. (2002) propose a conceptual model that classifies customer knowledge management into three components: "*for*", "*from*", and "*about*", types of structured information that can be captured from different sources and multiple channels to increase organization abilities in personalizing the customer experience (Gebert, Geib, Kolbe, & Brenner, 2003 p.107-123). This model is rarely to be found or implemented in relation to the brand and customer experience practices, therefore this paper aims to submit a reframing model, or better, to propose a configuration of CKM dimensions to better integrate experience capabilities, in terms of consistency and effectiveness. A possible danger in implementing consumer knowledge as a facilitator of brand experience is to adopt a too narrow perspective. By ignoring the multiple effects affecting and resulting from digital transformation and marketing activity, the consumer knowledge model could lack the necessary quality to provide more integrative and powerful insights and or innovative marketing solutions (Czellar, 2003).

Knowledge about Customer. That is a result of the strategies that brands and organizations implement to manage the knowledge flow among customers. Is the type of knowledge that includes, demographics, contacts, customer's actions history, purchasing patterns, type of transactions, frequency, recurrence, favorites, and future demands, product interest, needs and wants, motivations, decision triggers, financial ability, appetite, and expectations from shopping (Mehdibeigi, Dehghani, & Mohammad Yaghoubi, 2016). Knowledge *about* customers is gained mainly through the offer, service, and interaction management, about main customer processes, and also from those who might become customers. Seen as the first and most used stage in customer life cycle progression, it helps companies to identify customers' future desires, changing tastes, and trends. Besides, it enables brands to acquire a sense of commitment so that their customers can be satisfied in the best way possible (Dous, Salomann, Kolbe, & Brenner, 2015).

It states that the development of such knowledge type is expensive and requires the implementation of specific tools and processes like CRM (Customer Relationship Management), ERP (Enterprise Resources Planning), and other BI (Business Intelligence) systems. Digitalization and the increase of business process automation have lightened the costs of tools and technical solutions (Brakus, Bernd, Schmitt & Shi Zhang 2008). Today we face an abundance of digital applications that enable companies to be more efficient at low-costs to nothing as more digital solutions are free. Applications such as GSuite, Zapier, IFTTT, Hootsuite, Zendesk are helping a lot of small companies tapping into

the power of automation, staying on top of the game, increasing agility, and at the same time, generating a lot of savings reducing errors (Aghamirian, Dorri, & Aghamirian, 2015). The specific scaling of customer knowledge is quite different today comparing with ten years ago. The increase in customer knowledge through the successive addition of new sources of knowledge, supported by AI and digital transformation processes has increasingly enriched and round the companies' customer knowledge in terms of the behavior, content, acquisition, benefits of customer loyalty, and increasing participation in the customers' lifetime value (Smith & McKeen, 2005).

Knowledge *about* the customer in correlation with brand experience model Schmitt (1999) and Gentile, Spiller, and Noci (2007) that conceptualize brand experience around *sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioral* and *relational* dimensions (the *sense, feel, think, act, relate* model) focuses on *interaction (sense)* and *act* dimensions – of how offers, actions, and mechanics proposed by brands relate in interests and behavior of the consumers (Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2020; Gentile, Spiller, & Noci 2007). This implies brads into looking and managing customers' backgrounds, actions, tastes, and does, which are significant tabs in delivering customer satisfaction through facile interaction and pleasure through an engaging experience (Rupak, William, Greg & Paul, 2008).

Knowledge from Customer. It is the knowledge acquired *from* customer interactions with products, services, and experience context. It is the most dynamic stream of consumer knowledge that has an intrinsic and extrinsic perspective that should be managed properly (Xu & Walton, 2005). Composing both perspectives, knowledge *from* customer catalyzes the process of value co-creation, companies have facile access to what customer thinks and feel about products, suppliers, markets, and organization. Also as a tacit dimension companies can tap into customer insights, facts, preferences for-or consumption, reviews, ratings, and opinions. It is what brands should take into consideration and focus on managing customer and brand experience (Du Plessis, 2007).

The acquired knowledge *from* the customer has to be embraced by companies in idea generation for new products and services and constant enhancement of offers, services, user experience (UX), and customer journey development (Hem & Iversen, 2003). Methods of attaining knowledge *from* customers are diverse, and companies should choose and configure appropriate and personalized solutions, consistent with their market, conditions, and capacities (Hem & Iversen, 2003). The use of social media trends and audience insights, comments, reactions (psychological and behavior), discussion forums, market research, NPS, and regular face-to-face interaction should help brands understanding the impact of external and internal business environment on customer's experience (Garcia-Murillo & Annabi, 2002). Exploiting customer knowledge and turn it into explicit knowledge is the central meaning of knowledge *from* the customer factor. By using various ways of gaining knowledge from different customers with different levels of knowledge, and granting them the possibility and necessary means to express their views, problems, doubts, and relational experiences, brands will facilitate a better understanding of customer pain points and at the same time the direction in which they have to reconfigure customer experience (Dalli, Romani, & Gistri, 2006).

Knowledge *from* the customer stream is strongly related to *think* and *feel* brand experience dimensions. To deliver a consistent experience, specialists need to integrate and compose the information *from* customer independently on both dimensions. The *think* dimension appeals to customer knowledge level and maturity in company product and services interaction, including similar markets and competition products (Gibbert, Leibold, & Probst, 2002). Today and future business must facilitate customers into expressing opinions and ideas about products and services or proposed experiences. Engaging customers in imaginative thinking and co-creation capability and facilitate their interaction with the brand into constant enhancement is an active part of making the experience more memorable (Mehdibeigi, Dehghani & Mohammad Yaghoubi, 2016). The *feel* dimension is related to emotional responses and affective experiences that may range from mildly positive moods related to a brand to strong emotions of satisfaction and joy.

The relationship between knowledge *from* and *feel* experience dimension is strongly related to the type of customer relationships and associations that can affect information given to customers and at the same time the company's ability in making the interaction pleasurable (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci 2007).

Knowledge for Customer. Is the knowledge that customer attains from the company and enables them to understand company actions and practical knowledge about products, new offers, services, innovation, and suppliers which meant to satisfy their queries (Gibbert, Leibold, & Probst, 2002). Knowledge *for* Customer is a constant process of preparing relevant information that firms organize and disclose to the customer, which can be considered a platform for sharing knowledge for the customer which co-creates value for the firm (Darroch, 2005). This dimension of knowledge has a greater impact on customer perception of services and product quality. It encompasses what a company provides for its customers to satisfy the specific knowledge needs, and improve the level of their knowledge (Gebert et al., 2003). Knowledge *for* customers impacts positively long-term benefits by generating fresh ideas and continuous improvement of products/services. Another important aspect of knowledge for customers is that it creates short-term value by ensuring information, understanding, experience, effectiveness, as well as increasing brand relevance (Smith & McKeen, 2005).

New research highlights that customers as knowledgeable entities generate complex implications. One of the most important implications of the customer knowledge management model is that customers are no longer passive recipients of products/services as in traditional knowledge management, becoming valuable co-creator in business innovation and experience management. Furthermore, the model has a more dynamic approach, and as result reconfigures the customer relationship model releasing customers from the drawback of customer loyalty schemes associated to customer relationship management actions (Dous, Salomann, Kolbe, & Brenner, 2015).

Customer knowledge management is at the same time distinct from traditional knowledge management considering the objectives aimed. While traditional customer relationship models are about efficiency gains in one to many actions, the customer knowledge management model is about quality in innovation capabilities and upscaling brand and customer experience (Chua & Banerjee, 2013). Customer knowledge models intensify the brand opportunities to develop partnerships with their customers, considered as co-creators of business and brand value. At the same time, it is in stark contrast to maintaining and nurture an existing customer base just for repetitive promotional actions that will erode the database. What classical CRM claims related to the fact that "retention is cheaper than acquisition" has become increasingly difficult nowadays, where competitors' offerings and product benefits are too often lookalikes and only two mouse-clicks away (Cavusgil, Calantone, & Zhao, 2003). Consequently, customer knowledge management models are less about continuously increasing the retention figures and more about generating corporate growth through understanding the changes in customer behavior, through engaging new and existing customers in an active and value-creating dialogue enhancing the brand experience (Cui & Wu, 2016).

The combination of customer knowledge management and brand experience dimensions is a dynamic method for defining and elaborate micro-moments and customer journey experience (Massaro, Handley, Bagnoli, & Dumay, 2016). Digitalization and implementation of smart technology have determined a growing need for more tailored content therefore customer journeys have become more diverse and complex than ever forcing brands to start composing, targeting, and optimizing their content in ways to keep consumers engaged. We have reached the point where simple customer journeys or generic advertising that serves everyone is no longer viable. Therefore, offering a great customer experience is about delivering a certain series of reactions that add up to the brand experience (Zhang, 2011).

Expanding on brand experience dimensions

Brand experience is an all-encompassing brand interaction that strengthens the relationship with the consumer, is composing every aspect of the journey and in-between moments, starting from the pre-experience phase, the first “I want to know” or search moment that helps customers ideate their needs to their final purchase and post-purchase moments (Bridges, Keller, & Sood, 2000). On the other hand, customer experience is about matching consumer expectations on contextual factors (e.g. creating an atmosphere around the price, convenience, availability, response time, friendliness, cool factor, product quality, and service/support) (Cowley & Mitchell, 2003).

Because in nowadays business environment these concepts are often misused, “experience” becoming an over-brand for anything, (e.g. efficiency, summing touchpoints interactions, measurable and monitoring actions, mixing verbatims from social media with big data and machine-based algorithms that correlate to business KPIs), it is important to restate these concepts in a more comprehensive structure and underline the important elements and aspects of each one (Bottomley & Holden, 2001). Although experience is a broader term, it is important to understand that brand and consumer experience concepts are interchangeable, one affecting another but far from meaning the same thing or measured in the same way (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Both customer and brand “drivers” underline the experience and it is important to understand and design for them not just creating some moments that may lack in memorability (Davenport, Harris, & Kohli, 2001). In 1999, Pine & Gilmore presented their model of experience marketing which shows the relationship between the addition of experiences on products and services that drives successful customer experience. Brand experience does not require a motivational precondition as experiences could occur even when the consumer is not showing interest or it does not exist a personal connection with the brand. Even more, brands with a high degree of involvement from consumers are not necessarily brands that evoke the strongest experiences (Schmitt, 1999, p.53-67).

Brand experience concept has emerged from the experiential marketing area (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and is associated with alternative constructs such as shopping experience, product experience, and customer experience (Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009). The brand experience concept is conceptualized as the ability of brands to generate specific feelings, sensations, insights, and behaviors through brand-related stimuli where both rational and emotional responses are present. (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello 2009). The brand-related stimuli can be defined as brand connection elements, such as logo, packaging, color scheme, messages, design of brand environments such as stores or websites, and other external information sources that help consumers to evaluate brands (Romani, Grappi, & Dalli, 2012).

Several studies have been conducted to find specific valuable descriptors of the brand experience based on its definitions and dimensions. The brand experience should affect not only past-oriented discernment of satisfaction but also future-oriented consumer feelings. A greater brand experience should not be associated solely with familiarity, is also critically affects brand understanding, enjoyment, enhancing, and fostering the brand. Also, Xu et al. (2011) proved that brand experience can be positively but indirectly associated with relational benefits and that brand image, brand personality, and familiarity can serve as mediators in brand experience. This finding suggests that brand and marketing specialists should integrate models and mechanics to understand customers' perceptions of relational benefits with the brand environment and develop strategies that lead to ongoing consumer relationships (Xu & Walton, 2011).

The brand experience incorporates a set of conditions that contribute to how customers perceive the brand. Experience is an alchemy of three systemic elements: rational (cognitive) activities, emotional (affective) responses, and behavioral intentions (conation) (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Padgett & Allen, 1997). According to Spiller and Noci (2007), the purpose of experience is to provide a holistic perspective and implies

a holistic approach on all constructed components, such as sensory, that appeal to the senses; affective, which appeals to the inner feelings and emotions of consumers; cognitive aspect that appeals to the consumer's intellect; behavioral that appeals to bodily experience, lifestyle and consumer interactions, and relationships that appeal to forms of socialization and interconnections with people or cultures (Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2019; Brakas et al., 2009).

The *sense experience* dimension is related to providing aesthetic pleasure, excitement, beauty, and satisfaction through sensory by stimulating the visual, tactile, auditory, gustative, and olfactory senses to create exciting and immersive experiences (Schmitt, 1999). Having a high impression value and often include fast paces and movement pieces, designed to motivate the customer and to demonstrate superior brand value. At the same time, the senses experience has "cognitive consistency" because it follows a stylistic and thematic order forcing our brain to process similarities between the various stimuli. Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009). Regarding the implication of sensorial experiences, it is confirmed that customers display a visual sensibility to brand communication like web design, packaging, product look and feel, sounds, and general shop atmosphere, especially when they are in the pre-purchase phase or they are not familiar with the brand. This combination of sensorial elements could significantly encourage brand consideration and purchase decisions Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009). Therefore, combining knowledge *about* and *from* the customer with the *sense* dimension helps identify the important aspects of the "multisensory" effect and elements that interact with the digital communication spectrum influencing customer satisfaction (Nysveen, Pedersen, & Skard, 2012).

The *feel experience* dimension is intended to affect, to create a specific emotional response. Emotional responses like excitement, empathy, happiness, impatience, affection, positiveness, pleasure, frustration, surprise, seduction, pride, and uniqueness are important components of the consumption experience (Gentile, Spiller & Noci, 2007). The existence of an emotional dimension, Dubé, and Lebel (2003), demonstrates that customer pleasure is derived from emotional, intellectual, social, physical, and social experiences. For example, happiness expressed in brand consideration or pre-acquisition phase could be triggered by the acquisition of the last product available on a special offer (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). In the same regard, frustration may occur when a very good offer with a special price is lost or when necessary information is missing or are hard to find on a web platform due to the poor user experience design (Joshi & Sharma, 2004). Dealing with the *feel* dimension comes through creating moments and micro-moments that are susceptible to an affective response like a simple "good choice" message when you purchase a product or the feel-good moments (moments that matter) encountered in every customer touchpoints (Dalli, Romani, & Gistri, 2006).

Think experience dimension appeals to customer intellect. They are cognitive experiences, which provide opportunities and engage customers in creative, imaginative thinking having the capacity to surprise, intrigue, and provoke customer curiosity. (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). A customer think the experience could appear when marketing offer leads to engage in convergent thinking (analytical reasoning, evaluations), re-evaluation of the proposed offer or a change in the way brand is perceived and divergent thinking (imaginative) when customers are engaged in category comparisons with other competitors' marketing offers and begins to evaluate quality, promotions, prices and translate this evaluation to the brand (Belkahl & Triki 2011). Think experience is more engaging than simply attempting to educate on the functional and utilitarian attributes of the product because consumers play an active role in making the brand experience more memorable by making considerations, evaluations, impression about the offer and therefore is creating connections between consumers and brands (Hoch, 2002).

The *act experience* dimension focuses on active physical experiences and changes in behavior and lifestyle. It is about actions and activities that engage customers as a consequence of an encounter with a touchpoint. It also may trigger changes in lifestyle

determined by the brand values (Chen & He 2003, p.676). Act experience dimension could determine changes in purchase behavior, for example, the time duration between acquisition and delivery of the product, or bad customer service or pain points related to customer journey and touchpoints which triggers over-planning and relinquishing actions (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci 2007). The interconnections between act experience and knowledge for the consumer could be an important tool to engage consumers in entertaining and fun experiences which are increasingly sought by consumers who often desire to escape reality, especially in tough times (Du Plessis, 2007).

The *relate experience* dimension, includes connections with other individuals through social experiences that are triggered by the marketing offers and appeals to the individual's desire of solidarity, sympathy, need for self-improvement, or being perceived positively by others (Schmitt, 1999). Consumers value the social world context, which can be described as the pleasure of interacting with other people (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). Customers are looking for social identity, and relate to others or trying to distinguish themselves) through the marketing offer and brand possession or brand value, to a culture, reference group, social category, brand community, etc. Relational experience is especially relevant for service brands since it can help predict satisfaction, likeability, and brand loyalty (Nysveen, Pedersen, & Skard, 2012).

Gentile, Spiller, and Noci (2007) pinpointed a major challenge in managing brand experience related to the difficulty of managing all the touchpoints where brand experience is generated and should be monitored and regulated upon each touchpoint. Although Palmer (2000) states that consumers expect to have the same experience at every opportunity to buy, the biggest challenge in managing the brand experience is to cope with the complexity of its control, given the number of touchpoints available to consumers these days (Smith & McKeen). Another relevant challenge related to brand experience is the fact that companies focus too much on the brand promise aspects and too little on delivering that promise along the touchpoints and consistent with the customer journey. The comprehensive translation of the brand promise into each step of the customer journey is where usually things go wrong or are even completely lacking (Aghamirian, Dorri, & Aghamirian, 2015).

Conclusions

The primary objective of this study is to examine the direct influence between the customer knowledge management model (about, from, and for the customer) and the brand experience model, focusing on critical aspects and significant relationships between the dimensions of the models. The secondary objective was to show how the dimensions of the two models could be interlinked into a holistic approach that becomes essential in nowadays business setup where the customer needs are continually shifting and staying viable on the market to capitalize opportunities it became a critical issue. Customer knowledge management has been branched out from the combination of customer relationship management and knowledge management and lately considered to be a new business learning process where experience and knowledge can be shared between customers and firms or brands (Mahmud, Ramayah & Kurnia, 2017).

Regardless of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the type of business, the economic uncertainties caused by the pandemic should be reasonable enough to take a second look at strategic actions and proper business tools to maintain customer closeness in a distancing scenario. Because people's routines and lives have been greatly impacted and there is a continuous state of insecurity, financial discomfort, the reshaping working, and entertaining environment, companies have to understand that now more than ever has to recompose and readapt marketing plans and their business models. This new perspective on brand experience and customer knowledge model has been provided to acknowledge this holistic approach as a necessary process that could be easily implemented in day-to-

day business actions as having a good potential to solve problems for consumers and provide companies the ability to grow and expand when business is under siege.

The main implications arising for this practice is that CKM (namely knowledge *from* the customer, knowledge *for* the customer, and knowledge *about* the customer) in correlation with brand experience has a significant impact on business performance as well as an indirect effect on customer experience and can be used to facilitate product innovation capabilities, reconfigure the communication plan, enhance new service market performance, facilitate the identification of emerging opportunities, and improve customer value co-creation (Aghamirian, Dorri, & Aghamirian, 2015). This study was limited to reviewed literature and published research studies on the presented models without a structural link between them. Future research will analyze the interconnections between model dimensions and the correlation and path analysis to measure the relation between elements.

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