

# Post purchase experience A multidisciplinary review

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## Abstract

Current research in the marketing field thematises consumer behaviour largely with a focus on buying behaviour, while after purchase experiences and behaviour are less discussed, even if they have a great impact on a product's success. The following paper responds to this deficiency by investigating which factors trigger positive customer experiences, emotions and evaluations in the post purchase phase. Based on a review of existing literature, the paper presents different concepts of experiences in design and marketing fields in relation to the post purchase phase. Achieving multidisciplinary knowledge on customer experience is useful for designers, in order to integrate products and services into a larger consumption context e.g. related to the consumer experiences of a brand. Based on the findings from the literature review, the paper reveals gaps and connections between the marketing and design field and indicates areas for further common research on post purchase experience.

**Keywords:** *Post purchase, experience, consumer behaviour, branding*

## 1 Introduction

The term 'post purchase' commonly signifies the period of time after a customer acquires a product or service. Recently several scholars and authors in design and marketing have pointed out that this stage is neglected in research and customer post sales might not get the level of attention it deserves (He, Chen, & Alden, 2015; Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2010; Newbery & Farnham, 2013). Current consumer behaviour research in design and marketing has a strong focus on how to encourage purchase decisions (Richins, 2008), so much so that post purchase phase has been overlooked to a great degree (Mugge et al., 2010). Few studies in marketing literature have e.g. focused on strengthening and maintaining brand attitudes following a purchase (He et al., 2015). Many studies on consumption emotions analyse emotions *before* buying a product, while little attention has been paid to the consumers' emotions and experiences *after* purchase (Richins, 2008), despite the fact that the post purchase phase has strong impact on repurchase behaviour (Mugge et al., 2010), product reputation and customer loyalty (Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009).

Related to post purchase, existing research often considers how to prevent and handle problems such as regret and cognitive dissonance (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2014), or how to deal with dissatisfaction (Wang, Liang, & Peracchio, 2011). Sound product design and satisfactory

product control have been suggested as an important *quality and usability factor* to meet these challenges. The designer's role is here to develop products that are easy and effective to use. The *service factor* to diminish dissatisfaction with product purchase relates to improved customer service, which today's customers expect increasingly as a necessary supplement to product purchase. Further, consideration of the *experience factor* has become a necessity in the last 15 years for product (purchase) satisfaction as e.g. Pine and Gilmore (1998) point out. These authors pioneered 'experiences' as a distinct economic contribution to become the next competitive arena (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Today it is commonly accepted in marketing and design literature that meeting *quality, usability, service, and experience factors* is indispensable for successful product- and service development (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zhang, 2014; Philipp, Gorgoglione, Buonamassa, Panniello, & Nguyen, 2013). However, especially research on how experience influences the post purchase stage is less present.

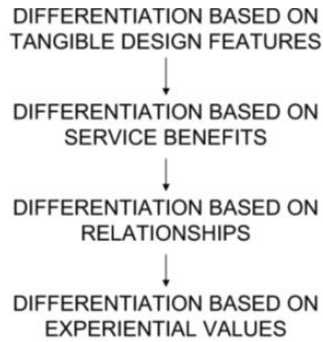
This paper discusses how the experience factor can act as differentiator to keep the customer engaged after purchase. Different experience concepts are presented and post purchase customer experience is investigated with help of a literature analysis. Literature selection was based on the following keywords: Post purchase, after purchase, post sales, after sales, experience, behaviour, satisfaction, in the fields: Design research, marketing, management, business and applied psychology. In addition, literature on customer experience, and experience design were appraised. Findings were categorized in literature on referring to an *organizational level*, i.e. customer-company interactions and literature referring to an *individual level*, i.e. product-person interactions. Most design literature is product-person oriented, while marketing, management and business literature is rather customer-company oriented. Following the literature analysis, the experience of brands as a bridge between marketing and design research to study post-purchase behaviour in both fields is introduced.

## 2 'Experience' in design and marketing concepts

### 2.1 Experience concepts in design

There is no general definition for the term 'experience' and scholars use a variety of interpretations (Palmer, 2010; Petermans, Janssens, & Van Cleempoel, 2013). However, an emotional component often distinguishes an experience from any other encounter. Accordingly, the Cambridge dictionary explains experience as something that happens to you that affects how you feel (Cambridge University, 2015). In the context of this paper, 'experience' is used as all-encompassing definition for any type of interaction between a customer and a company and/or product that leads to an emotional response. A prominent experience concept in design research refers to how the profession has evolved over time in relation to the consumer market. As Donald Norman puts it: *'Design has moved from its origins of making things look attractive (styling), to making things that fulfil true needs in an effective understandable way (design studies and interactive design) to the enabling of experiences (experience design). Each step is more difficult than the one before each requires and builds upon what was learned before.'* (Norman, 2012).

This transition from designing attractive commodities to providing experiences is among others historically reflected in the profession in the increasing focus on user experience e.g. in human computer interaction (HCI). Another indicator is the emergence of design fields such as emotional design and experience design. The adaptation of the design profession corresponds to the differentiation in the marketplace in marketing illustrated in Figure 1.

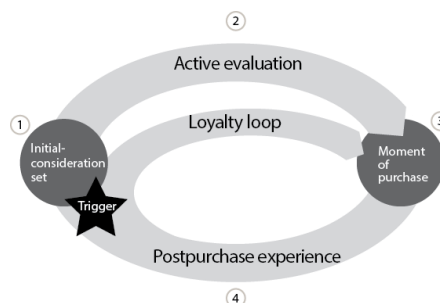


**Figure 1: Differentiation in the marketplace (Palmer, 2010)**

Several scholars and practitioners point out that impressing customers is achieved through the addition of experiential values and factors (Brakus et al., 2014; Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). One reason for experiences being able to provide a competitive advantage is that they are valued higher by customers and cannot be imitated like traditional quality factors (Brakus et al., 2014; Mascarenhas, Kesavan, & Bernacchi, 2006). On an *individual level*, usability and functional attributes of products can e.g. easily be copied through reverse engineering, and, on an *organizational level*, any company can provide price match policies or warranty programs that provide *service quality* in the post purchase phase. However, since these factors are commonly available, they become something that consumers expect. In the last decades, consumption scenarios have become more complex. Today's designers have to align products and services to fit in larger contexts and to consider several touchpoints connected to the product/service experience. The following section will discuss both, experiences on an individual level i.e. from a product-person standpoint, and how organizations try to manage and influence the experience of customers.

## 2.2 The customer journey

'Customer journey' is a frequently used term, to understand consumer behaviour. The journey can be illustrated by stages such as need recognition, information search, evaluation, purchase and post purchase (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2014) where post purchase is regarded as the final stage where customers evaluate their satisfaction with the purchase and will consider whether or not to buy the product/service in the future. Most research on consumer behaviour has focused on buying behaviour. Consequently, the journey up until the point of purchase has received most attention. Results from a large scale study conducted by McKinsey opposes this linear way of thinking about the buying process (Elzinga et al., 2009) and suggests a circular journey shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Circular decision journey, adapted from (Elzinga et al., 2009).**

Newbery and Farnham (2013) are some of the few authors who divide the post purchase phase further as: First use (out of box experience), continued use, discontinue, renew/recycle. Consumer experiences emerge from interactions between the customer and product, and the customer and organization or company that provides the product. Through these interactions,

value is created for the customer and the company (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). Further, to sustain lasting customer loyalty in the post purchase phase, it is important to deliver a holistic customer experience, for example by creating consistency across all the shopping phases (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). Addressing customer experience also implies an emotional component. Today customers are not considered (anymore) as purely rational but also guided by impulses and feelings (Brakus et al., 2014). Experiences affect how a person feels and emotional bonds may develop between the customer and a product/service or a company (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). If products and services provide satisfaction through usability and quality factors together with high emotional experience value overall customer experience can be triggered. In a commercial as well as design setting, it is important to consider the value provided to and experienced by customers (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). Authors identify two main types of consumer value, utilitarian and hedonic. Utilitarian value refers to the instrumental or practical value, such as product quality or the ability to perform a task effectively. Hedonic value includes an affective component and accounts for the experiential value based on an affective definition of experience (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007).

### **2.3 Experience and loyalty**

Literature argues that an overall satisfactory experience may lead to long lasting loyalty (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). However, it is challenging to design and manage customer experience on an operationally acceptable level as Palmer (2010) points out. The subjectivity of experiences makes it difficult to tailor experiences that meet the needs and expectations of a large variety of customers. Empirical evidence has however shown that some experiential factors are common (Gentile et al., 2007), which increases the motivation to meet these challenges. In a service setting, Klaus and Maklan (2012) developed for example a measure of customer experience quality (Klaus & Maklan, 2012) that has been tested and validated to be a more effective measure than traditional service quality indicators (Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Philipp et al., 2013). Another way to manage customer experience is to learn from the shortcomings of earlier similar constructs. Customer experience management is commonly regarded as a successor to customer relationship management (Palmer, 2010). The latter builds on the analogy of close personal relationship, emphasizing cooperation, mutuality and trust (O'Malley & Tynan, 1999). It has been noted that relational strategies pursued by organizations in some cases have had the unintended consequence of deteriorating consumers' trust (O'Malley & Prothero, 2004). To be successful, the entire organization should be focused on providing meaningful customer experiences, not just view them as simple marketing schemes or wrappings to products or service (Philipp et al., 2013). The following section will specify product experience and its relation to the individual and to the company/organizational level.

## **3 Product Experience**

### **3.1 Experience and emotion**

The definition of experience in the Cambridge dictionary emphasises emotional response. When considering human-product interaction, not all products have high probability to elicit significant emotions during consumption. Less 'emotional', utilitarian products can be referred to as mundane products (Richins, 2008), and include everyday items such as toothpaste. Products that elicit emotions in almost every customer are often expensive or have strong hedonic, symbolic or experiential qualities. These can be referred to as extraordinary products (Richins, 2008). Examples are cars, jewellery or fashion items. A product may also shift from mundane to extraordinary and vice versa, based on the context of the consumption and the customer (Richins, 2008). The following section thematises extraordinary and condi-

tional products that have the potential to elicit emotions. These emotions can be triggered and influenced by both the product-person interaction and customer-company interaction. Emotions that are elicited in the post purchase phase cannot be seen in isolation from the rest of the customer journey. Satisfaction literature commonly addresses the influence of expectations in relation to product performance; however, there are also more emotional and imaginative aspects to consider. For example, Richins (2008) claims that the cognitive and affective process of the consumer before acquisition influences both the magnitude and nature of the experienced emotion after acquisition (Richins, 2008). Consumers imagine how they will feel driving a new car or how they will look in a new dress, what their friends will think, etc. These imaginations are influenced by prior experiences, and personal, social and cultural values and emotions connected to them are carried over in the post purchase stage where they influence emotions during consumption.

### 3.2 Product experience

Hekkert and Schifferstein (2008) provide an epistemological explanation of product experience as the research area that develops an understanding of people's subjective experiences that result from interacting with products (Hekkert & Schifferstein, 2008). When understanding how to elicit such a response one can purposely attempt to 'design for experience'. Seen in relation to the broader construct of customer experience, product experience is more specifically focused on the product and its user. Hekkert and Desmet (2007) propose the following three levels of product experience:

- Aesthetic experience: The degree that all the senses are satisfied or pleased (including visuals, sound, touch, smell)
- Experience of meaning: Meanings attached to the product (the personal or symbolic significance of products based on an individual's cognitive process). As an example, a person might give symbolic meaning to a product as luxurious, masculine or feminine. This is due to semantics and symbolic association of the stimuli provided by the product.
- Emotional experience: Feelings and emotions that are elicited (because of cognitive, though often automatic and unconscious evaluation of the significance of a stimulus for one's personal wellbeing).

Even if the experience of meaning and emotion has different reference frames and is experienced differently by people, the framework illustrates that designers purposely facilitate specific affective experiences of a product through aesthetics, semantics and symbolic meaning.

### 3.3 Design for experience

When it comes to 'designing for experience' a recently presented framework by Hassenzahl (2010) seems less ambivalent than the one by Hekkert and Desmet (2007). He defines experience as a story, emerging from the dialogue of a person with her or his world through action (Hassenzahl, 2010). To influence this story through a product, Hassenzahl argues that one should start with the why, emphasizing the emotions involved in an activity, the meaning and the experience. Then one can consider what actions the product should afford and how to put those functions into action (Hassenzahl, 2012). In support of the notion that the experiential factor is a better differentiator than the utility factor, Hassenzahl argues that most commercial products are too practical or open ended, and lead to uninspiring and obvious stories. To illustrate a shift of focus from the material to the experiential, Hassenzahl (2012) uses an alarm clock as an example: *'The Philips Wake-Up Light has the power to 'transcend its encasing' because its contribution is not one to the aesthetics of things, but to the aesthetics of experiences. This is the challenge designers and vendors of interactive products face: Experience or*

*User Experience is not about good industrial design, multi-touch, or fancy interfaces. It is about transcending the material. It is about creating an experience through a device.*

The experience in this case is mediated with technology; however, the story told by the product is experience-centred instead of technology-driven. Using storytelling through products might in that way facilitate experience and emotional response.

### **3.4 Product attachment**

Based on our literature review, the majority of research on product attachment is published in design journals, with a few articles found in the Journal of Consumer Marketing (Mugge et al., 2010). Product attachment can be defined as the strength of the emotional bonds a customer experiences with a product (Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008). These emotional bonds form over time in the post purchase phase. If attachment is achieved, people will often display protective behaviours, taking care of the object and repairing it if necessary to postpone product replacement (Mugge et al., 2005). To obtain a personal and special meaning, a product should provide the owner with something exceptional above its utilitarian value (Mugge et al., 2005). This implies the importance of experiential and emotional factors beyond functionality. Still, attachment and satisfaction are higher for products with above average utility than for products with average utility (Mugge et al., 2010). In order to stimulate attachment, Mugge and Schoormans (2008) distinguish four elicits: pleasure, self-expression, memories and group affiliation. Meeting one or more of these may develop an emotional bond between a person and a product. Other factors mentioned are uniqueness or products that age gracefully. For an in-depth explanation of elicits is referred to Mugge et al. (2008). While a designer can encourage product meaning, it is the individual consumer who gives the product meaning. This meaning may differ based on cultural, social and personal influences (Mugge et al., 2008). The subjectivity of experiences, as pointed out by Palmer (2010) and Hekkert and Desmet (2007) can be seen as a challenge for successfully and deliberately eliciting a specific response.

One real world example of efforts to promote product attachment is the Norwegian jeans manufacturer Livid Jeans: *‘Through its livid bruising, it’ll tell a story that you’ll remember and cherish, creating a resilient relationship which will make you never wear anything but a raw denim jeans again (Livid Jeans, 2015)’*

This is an example of promoting meaning through self-expression and memories, and emphasizing that wear will only make the product look better. Jeans do not last forever, but to delay product replacement, Livid offer to repair jeans in their store free of charge the first time. In doing so, they have established an additional touchpoint, and a possibility for a meaningful brand-consumer encounter. The retail environment also provides a unique experience to the customer because the store houses sewing machines and actual production facilities where jeans are both repaired and produced, a sight not commonly seen. In the store, employees occasionally give compliments to customers who have a pair of “bruised” jeans, promoting the sense of being part of a group or community (group affiliation). Interestingly most of these measures are not a result of characteristics of the product itself. To the average consumer, subtle differences in quality and characteristics of jeans might go unnoticed, and not be enough to promote attachment. However, in relation to brand narratives, qualities are connected with experiences and this combination provides a promising link between design and marketing research perspectives. When looking at customer experience, the brands are important as they shape the customer experience (Fatma, 2014) and positively relate to customer satisfaction and loyalty (Brakus et al., 2014). Traditionally the emphasis of marketing activities has been to focus on functional aspects and utilitarian value (ex. quality, delivery, price

and customer support) (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). Following the belief that customers are not only rational decision makers, experimental marketing views customers as both rational and emotional pleasure seekers. The marketing goal is to create consistency and coherency between individual experiences in consumer-brand encounters to provide an overall holistic experience that improve the customer's impression of the brand (Schmitt, 1999). Despite being aware of this for more than a decade, marketing literature has mostly focused on eliciting favourable brand attitudes prior to purchase (He et al., 2015). The question is if one can provide a holistic experience without properly understanding how brand attitudes develop post purchase.

He et al. (2015) present two possible paths of post purchase brand attitude development; decline due to adaptation, or increase due to the formation of a relationship, arguing that the adaptation path is dominant. A reason mentioned for brand attitude decline is that excitement from a purchase diminishes as the newness of a product fades. Within the relationship path, customers gradually develop attachment and connections to brands through meaningful consumer-brand encounters, and consequently favourable brand attitudes are maintained or enhanced over time by the company (He et al., 2015). Establishing product attachment might be one way to maintain positive association with a product as the newness of a product fades and adaptation sets in. The brand itself may also affect the post purchase evaluation of products. An interesting example is a study investigating the consequence of choosing preferred brands versus a less preferred brand (Chu, Song, & Choi, 2013). With expensive and extraordinary products, such as cars, budget constraints force some consumers to settle for a less preferred brand. *'There are many psychological disadvantages of a less preferred brand. When a less preferred brand is selected, the most preferred brand may haunt consumers and serve as a reference point for further comparisons.'* (Chu et al., 2013)

The study also revealed that when a customer experiences positive product outcomes, those who choose a less preferred brand attributes the outcome to their own smart choice, while those who chose their most preferred brand tend to give credit to the brand. Conversely, when the outcome is negative, those who choose the preferred brand blame themselves, while those who choose the less preferred brand blame the brand. This study proves that brands strongly influence the cognitive process of evaluating a purchase, and the resulting affective response. The study further demonstrated that buyers of less preferred brands experience more regret than buyers of most preferred brand, and suggest that this is due to lingering attachment or residual desires for the more preferred brand even after purchase (Chu et al., 2013). One can assume that this type of reaction could obstruct both attachment to the brand and the product in question. This is an interesting topic for further study.

## 4 Findings

Several scholars and practitioners recognize experiences as key differentiator in the marketplace, as tangible design features and service benefits become comparable to the point of commoditization, but utilitarian value through functional benefits should not be neglected. Service and experience are nowadays almost valued equally and the product experience is seen in a holistic context. Experience can be a competitive advantage but is difficult to 'produce' due to its intangible nature. A lack of consensus on definition and meaning of experience adds to this ambiguity by making it challenging to establish a common ground for discussion. When 'designing for experience', thinking of an experience as a story, as presented by Hassenzahl, could be well suited to encompass the complex nature of experiences. Perhaps more so than regarding experiences as the cognitive and affective responses to set of stimuli. The reason is that a story makes it is easier to envision effects of time and acknowledge that the experiences are not static. With an analogy to literature and drama, the different stake-

holders that shape an experience can be regarded as characters in this story. Doing so might help designers align the products experience to fit within the more holistic construct of consumer experience. Then, the influence of the product-person interaction compliments the experience provided on an organizational level and vice versa, to provide an overall more holistic and pleasurable experience to the customer/user. Throughout this article, the subjectivity of experiences has been pointed out as a challenge to effectively and deliberately promote specific experiences and elicit the desired emotional response to these experiences. Because of differences from person to person, one will never be able to fully predict the reaction of a customer/user. One strategy to increase the probability of eliciting a desired response in products is to make them less open ended, and inscribe meaning into them instead of just leaving it to the user to make up its meaning (Hassenzahl, 2012). Another way is to acknowledge and perhaps manipulate other sources of influence on the product experience, such as pre purchase influence and the influence of consumer-company interactions. This implies getting involved on a strategic level of design. On an organizational level, providing and managing experiences could be misinterpreted as only a simple addition to boost sales and satisfaction amongst customers (Palmer, 2010) and companies still struggle to make sense of this concept (Hassenzahl, 2012).

This paper has identified the post purchase phase as the least investigated part of the consumer journey. To achieve a 'total experience', a better understanding of the post purchase phase is needed. For example, the commonly adopted circular customer journey proposed by McKinsey could put more focus on the post purchase phase in marketing. Taking a designer's approach, effective touchpoints that provide pleasurable experiences to the consumer could be identified in this phase. Thereby both field design and marketing would ensure a more holistic experience across the consumer journey. Designers are successfully considering the post purchase phase through investigating products and services in use, however, design oriented research tends to see the product-person relation not always connected to a commercial context. There is comparatively little design research investigating if product use always has the strongest influence on the user/customer experience and on product loyalty especially when it comes to the post purchase phase. On the other hand, a recent marketing article (2015) on post purchase brand attitudes mentions an opportunity for further research on how product features (hedonic versus utilitarian) influence post purchase brand attitude change (He et al., 2015). In other words, there are possibilities for joint scholarly pursuits between marketing and design research that could build on each other's strengths to advance both fields of study.

Product experience in the sourced design literature focused on the user perspective, and the strategic or commercial context was only occasionally briefly mentioned in the discussion of implications. It is suggested that product attachment may have a positive effect on brand loyalty (Mugge et al., 2008)], but the possibility of an inverse relationship is less discussed and lacks investigation. It is interesting to consider how brands could aid in establishing product attachment, as the example of Livid Jeans who try to make product attachment a part of their image. Similarly one could investigate if brands could obstruct the formation of attachment if a less preferred brand is chosen due to budget constraints, and lingering attachment to the most preferred brand still exists. Better understanding of a how product attachment is manifested in a commercial setting would be beneficial to promote actual implementation.

## **5 Conclusion**

This article has discussed how the experience is understood and utilized in the post purchase phase in different fields of study, both on an organizational and product-person level. Experiences were identified as a way to differentiate a product in the marketplace and engage the



customer. In spite of this, the subjective and intangible nature of experiences lead to challenges when trying to elicit or design for a specific response. The findings revealed both comparatively little knowledge on post purchase phase and a gap between marketing and design literature to deal with experience. Increased research on brand experience and e.g. loyalty in the post purchase phase is focusing on intangible values of product attachment. Thereby the post purchase phase would get more attention and the gap between marketing and design literature could be met.

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