Book Chapter Template

The importance of user experience in brand experience

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Abstract

When we interpret or interact with brand related stimuli, we refer to this as brand experience. As brands increasingly embrace digital platforms and rely on digital interfaces, the role of user experience becomes pivotal in shaping the bigger domain of brand experience. Therefore, to understand the role of user interface in relation to brand experience, we describe the key principles of effective user interface design. By adopting a case study approach, we draw on data extracted from Netflix user interviews to illustrate the key principles of effective user interface design.

Keywords: User experience, UX design, brand experience

1. Introduction

Every time we interact with a brand, such as seeing a visual reference, hearing its name, or using its products or services, an impression is formed in how we think, feel, and behave towards the brand [1]. We use these ongoing impressions and interactions, known as brand related stimuli, to continually modify our perceptions of the brand, resulting in either a generally positive, negative, or indifferent perspective of the brand [2]. We refer to this dynamic exchange as brand experience. While this conceptualisation encourages brands to consider the impact of every touchpoint, particularly in the physical world, there is an increasing importance on the role of user experience (UX) as a trigger for brand experience (BX). As brands increasingly become more digital and rely on digital interfaces, the role of a user experience becomes instrumental in shaping brand experience.

This chapter outlines how the evolution of the experience concept has been translated into various related concepts, and how these primarily are concerned with a shared goal of achieving excellent customer experience. As brands expand to online and omni channel offerings, and our interactions become more digitally facilitated, user experience is increasingly fundamental to achieving congruence in the journey of brand interactions. Having established the importance of user experience, the chapter outlines the key principles of effective user experience and

illustrates the application of these principles by drawing from a case study of Netflix to illustrate the key principles.

2. Why experience is critical for branding

The concept of the experience economy was first introduced by Pine and Gilmore [3], in which companies were encouraged to view their activities, not as simply products or services, but as experiences. The influence of this concept led to the emergence of various similar experience-related concepts, such as customer experience [4, 5], service experience [6], brand experience [1, 2], and user experience [7]. This attention on the different experiences reflected the differing concerns of related fields: hospitality and service industries focused on service experience, whereas marketing related fields focused on consumer experience and brand experience, and elsewhere the fields of design and human-computer interaction focused more specifically on user-experience. Although the culmination of these fields can be seen as being driven by providing the same purpose of 'excellent customer experience' [5] in the majority of cases we consider the providers of the experiences as 'brands' and their mechanisms of interaction as stimuli or, increasingly, user interfaces. The result is that by providing a better brand experience and user experience, the consumption of the experiences are more satisfying.

The acceleration of post-pandemic digital transformation has made companies aware of the need to improve their customer experience, particularly for online channels and digital services [8, 9]. The expansion of online companies, whose operating costs are generally lower than bricks-and-mortar outlets, have forced physical retailers to offer equivalent online channels, while transforming their physical stores into spaces for experiencing brands. Automobile brands, for example, have shifted their focus to online channels and offline dealerships' provide more direct and tangible experiences [10].

As customer journeys have moved offline to online in the mainstream markets, designing and managing the customer experience across touchpoints in different environments has become a significant challenge and an essential component of corporate marketing. Online and offline channels interact, and the prominent characteristics of one channel are transferred to the evaluation of other channels [11]. Without a seamless and unified experience across channels, brands risk becoming incongruous and diminishing their established brand associations. As online activity expands, so too will the importance of online experience.

2.1. User experience in the era of omni-channel

The main challenge for brands is to provide customers with a seamless customer experience by integrating offline, online, and mobile channels [11, 12]. Moreover, customers consider offline and online experiences in an integrated manner when purchasing a product or service [13]. With the rise of omni-channel customers expect to be able contact brands anytime, anywhere, and on any channel. Under these circumstances the primary channel that makes this possible is online.

Therefore UX is becoming increasingly crucial across industries due to the necessity for a continuous product and service connectivity and omnichannel delivery.

As the number of customer touchpoints increases, the digital experience for each touchpoint needs to be designed. The concept of UX extends from the mere instrumental focus of usability (e.g., effectiveness and efficiency) to a more affective one by explicitly encompassing a broad range of experiential components that are associated with the respective brand that the UX is representing [14]. User experience, therefore, consists of both pragmatic and hedonic attributes: pragmatic attributes refer to the product's, service's or system's functional usability, whereas the hedonic attributes relate to the emotional and non-instrumental needs of the user [15]. As the primary channel for brand and customer interaction is increasingly considered online, the UX becomes central to delivering the brand experience; thus through the UX design, customers will determine the brand's overall experience through the design of user interfaces.

2.2. Emergence of online brand experience

Brand experiences at virtual touchpoints such as websites inevitably involve user experience. Indeed, for many digital brands such as Google, Amazon and Ebay, the brand experience is entirely online, and UX is the primary driver of brand experience. The rapid evolution of smartphones and the nature of digital brands means that customers have the ability for unlimited access, which increases the frequency of brand experience through the extended engagement with the UX. The UX of digital brands is therefore instrumental for enhancing engagement and encouraging habitual brand experience.

Within this framing, functionality and flow are the theoretical basis of the online brand experience [16]. Functionality, which refers to the mechanical usability, is how efficient and convenient an online channel is used, whereas flow occurs contextually in the user's daily life [16]. Since usability is an acknowledged part of UX, which also includes the UX of physical products as well as digital, UX and online brand experience are closely related [17]. When customers buy goods online, they do so primarily because of the ease of use and convenience, in the same way that movie enthusiasts are pulled from movie theatres to Netflix because they appreciate the continuous flow and accessibility of content. Entirely digital brands consider that the essence of their appeal is to make users naturally immersed in a cognitive and affective experience during online activities [18]. Therefore an effective UX design that naturally induces immersion by discovering user needs, resolving inconveniences, and creating intuitive interfaces and contexts is crucial for enhancing online brand experience. These characteristics underpin the key principles of UX efficacy.

3. Methods of investigating user experience

To understand how features of a user interface affects the user experience, the study followed a qualitative process for analysing the user experience of the Netflix service. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted that incorporated the use of screen grabs, as visual elicitation tools, to facilitate the discussion. The key

themes of the interview questions were orientated around discovering the motivations for using the service, use of the interface, preferences and irritations of interacting with the service, and how the users would describe their general experience of engaging with the interface/brand. Open questions were primarily used, and care was taken to avoid posing leading questions to avoid introducing bias into the responses.

The sample of interviewees were identified through social networks in Leeds and across the campus at the University of Leeds. The main criterion for inclusion was that participants must have had prior experience of using Netflix for over 12 months. The gender split of the resulting sample was 55% male and 45% female, with a mix of 65% representing Asian ethnicity and 35% white European. The interviews were conducted in-person and, with permission, recorded to aid accurate transcription. The resulting data were thematically analysed for the closeness of fit to the three principles of UX design (see figure 1). The researchers also allowed flexibility in the coding to allow for any responses that did not cleanly fit into one of the three categories. However all subsequent responses were accommodated by the three key principles of UX design. These three principles are outlined below.

4. Key principles of user experience efficacy

The findings from the analysis demonstrate that there are three principles underpinning UX interfaces: (i) user needs, (ii) context, and (iii) affordances. These three principles are integral to effective design fundamentally because they reflect a user-centred approach. Firstly, the user's needs are identified and framed according to the individual requirements. Second, the context in which the experience takes place is considered as part of the likely circumstances that situate the experience within its anticipated user context(s). Third, the affordances relate to the features of the interface that indicate how users are expected to interact. In the following sections these principles are described and illustrated through the findings of the Netflix case study.

Figure 1. Three Elements for Designing UX
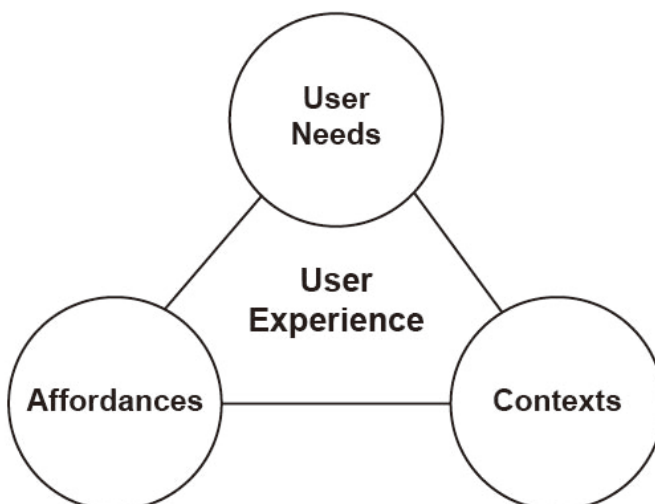
4.1 User Needs

User needs are an essential starting point of effective UX [19]. Identifying user needs involves two typical processes of observation and involvement. Firstly, this involves observing the users' interaction with a product or service, and how the characteristics trigger emotions [20]. Second, users are actively involved in the design process to help develop innovative product functions that reflect the context of individual needs and usages, which in turn helps to determine potential improvements [7, 21]. Through these processes users' needs can be distinguished into four types: Functional, Social, Temporal, and Hedonic. The most essential need is the expectation to be satisfied with the function of the interaction, so that the performance fulfills expectations. The social need is a reflection of an interface's ability to facilitate social connections and signaling aspects of the user's social standing. The third need is temporal, which refers to the relationship of time with the interaction, highlighting issues such as sequencing, delays, immediacy and continuance. Fourth and finally is the hedonic needs, which is the user needs that relate to the pursuit of pleasurable experiences that typically involve the more emotional aspects of the interactions, such as aesthetics. These different user needs can have varying influence; for instance, it is acknowledged that fulfilling particular psychological needs can increase the likelihood of positive experiences [20], and these needs are reflected in the contexts and affordances.

Table 1. Categorisation of User Needs and description

Need	Description
Functional	A need for pragmatic things that can be fulfilled by user interface design and technologies, such as satisfaction with product quality and convenience of features, ease of use, and optimized use environment.
Social	Pursuing relational values such as fashion, collective intelligence, influence on others, social status, friendship through product use, and desire to reveal one's consumption socially.
Temporal	A desire to adjust the passage of time by considering experience as a means to achieve the purpose, such as shortening search, waiting, and repetition, managing overall usage time, shortening task execution time, and spending leisure time using the product.
Hedonic	Desire to use the product for personal enjoyment, including the pursuit of escapist, emotional, aesthetic, and intellectually pleasurable experiences. It is essentially based on users' well-being in user experience [22].

In the case of Netflix, 12 types of user needs can be categorized into four themes; functional, social, temporal, and hedonic. Netflix serves a wide range of user needs (Table 1) catering to diverse preferences and viewing habits, which is a common characteristic of online brand experiences.

By fulfilling these user needs, Netflix has become a popular and versatile streaming platform satisfying a wide and diverse user base. However, user needs are only the first stage in designing an holistic UX frame; the two other key considerations to creating influential UX is the context of the user, and the design of affordances.

Table 2. Categorisation of Netflix User Needs with related themes and descriptions

Needs	Themes	Description
Functional	Accessibility	Users desire to watch content whenever and wherever they choose, using various devices such as smartphones, tablets, smart TVs, and computers at their convenience.
	Diverse Content Selection	Users have diverse tastes, so they need a vast library of content across genres, languages, and cultures catering to different interests. The library needs to be updated continuously and shown to users intuitively.
	Customisation	Users want to curate watch lists and receive tailored recommendations based on their viewing history.
Social	Group Viewing	Users want to enjoy the content with loved ones for their social relationships, reducing the cost based on sharing an account.
	Sharing	Users want to share their content experience with others, and get information and read reivews of content on social media.
Temporal	Content Search	Users want to quickly discover new and relevant content based on their interests, preferences, and viewing history.
	Seamless Watching	Users want to enter the page and watch content without any cease and waiting.
	Offline Viewing	In some cases, such as during travel or commuting, users need the option to download content quickly without an internet connection.
	Preparation for Future Watching	Users usually consider what they will watch later and want to record the content list.
Hedonic	Binge-Watching	The availability to watch multiple episodes or seasons of a TV series in succession caters to users who enjoy binge-watching, immersing themselves in the storytelling.
	Aesthetics	Users want to experience audiovisual beauty and artistic feelings for wholly immersion in watching content.

	Escapism	Users turn to Netflix seeking to relax and enjoy their leisure time for relaxation and escapism from their daily routines. For the same purpose, they sometimes want to experience nostalgia, seeking old movies or dramas which they have already watched last time.
	Multinational Culture	Users want to experience other countries' cultures through well-subtitled international Netflix content. Some users are learning foreign languages using Netflix. For these reasons, language selection is critical.

4.2 Contexts

The user experience of interfaces on websites, and other digital platforms is highly context-dependent [23]. In a user-interface sense, the term context refers to the conditions and circumstances that inform and potentially shape the interaction between users and entities. Contextual factors that are taken into consideration range from the user's anticipated emotional states, their expected individual interests, the typical place of usage – or task environments – as well as the amount of time required to accomplish a given task [24, 25]. These facets of UX contexts can be simplified into three areas: (1) user, (2) platform, and (3) environment [26]. A further key feature of these facets is that they are dynamic, as at any point there can be sudden changes to the user's needs, or the platform, or the environment.

As users are increasingly likely to own several devices, a satisfying user interface has to provide a seamless transition between devices throughout the day and respond to the changing contexts of the users [27]. However, that said, not all devices require the use of all features because they tend to be used in different ways, often in different contexts [28]. Devices, therefore, can be considered as part of an ecosystem encompassing several context branches, not in isolation.

Table 3. Contexts of Netflix UX

Contexts	Themes	Description
User	Different users in an account	Different profiles within a Netflix account (e.g., family members) have distinct viewing preferences.
	Taste Track	Users watch content similar to previously consumed content.
	Recently Watched	Users like content related to what they have watched recently or continue with a series.

Platform	Multitasking	Sometimes users conduct other tasks while simultaneously using Netflix.
	Multiple Devices	Users want a seamless experience with an optimized user interface across devices (e.g.., mobile, TV, or computer).
	Control Interactions	User interactions, such as rewinding, fast-forwarding, pausing, or skipping, are based on content and user preferences.
	Feedback	Users provide feedback, ratings and reviews, which informs their preferences and recommendations.
Environment	Spare Time	Users actively watch content throughout different periods of the day. This can be at weekends and or even commuting time.
	Users Location	Typically home and public transportation, including plane, bus, and subway. Also used in the gym while doing exercise or whilst a passenger in a car.
	Social Watching	Users share the content on social media; also discuss content with friends and family, before, during and after use.

To facilitate this shifting between platforms and environments user interfaces have to be adaptive to individual preferences, such as through the input of user profiling information and individual characteristics. By optimizing the migration across devices, smart user interfaces can identify the transition of the user across devices and provide a more seamless UX. This is particularly important for brands with a primarily physical presence, whose customers now expect the brand experience to be translated into a smooth omni-channel experience. Accordingly, user needs and contexts are organically connected: understanding the user's changing contexts better informs an appreciation of the user's needs.

The user contexts of online brands, such as Netflix, are related to the usage environment of digital products, specifically through the user interface (see table 3). For the user interface to be effective, it must reflect the commonalities expected in

the user's contexts, which includes having consistency across different versions of the user interface for different platforms and contexts [29]. To achieve the expected consistency of interfaces across different platforms, designers depend on the effective use of affordances.

4.3 Affordances

One of the most important requirements of an interface is that it is intuitive and easy to use. Attaining such an intuitive interface is dependent upon the effective use of affordances, which is a term used to refer to familiar features that are often understood from their use in other settings [30, 31]. The use of affordances in interface design enables users to navigate and use the features and functions of a system without the need of instructions [32].

Table 4. Affordances on the Netflix interface

Affordances	User Needs and Contexts
Content Navigation	Provides a visually appealing interface with large images that users can easily click on, allowing them to grasp other content options and further explore content intuitively.
Play Button	A noticeable play button on content thumbnails invites users to start watching. As a clearly recognizable symbol a play button intuitively indicates that it plays when users click on the icon.
Hover Over Preview	This feature automatically plays a short clip of the content when users hover over the preview thumbnail. This action encourages users to click on the content and engage.
Recommendation	Netflix leverages machine learning to provide personalized content recommendations based on user's viewing history and preferences. This encourages users to believe that the more they engage, the more deeply the platform can understand their interests and help them discover new content.
My List	Netflix allows users to save content they are interested in for later. The visual representation of content in the list provides a straightforward way for users to store and organize their choices.
Autoplay	After an episode, the subsequent episode is automatically played without requiring additional action from the user.
User Profiles	Netflix enables users to have multiple user profiles within one account, and provides personalized recommendations, and viewing records for each profile, enabling multiple users within a home to have their own personalized experience.

Posters	The same content is displayed differently in the thumbnail poster to each user. A show's displayed thumbnail is determined by the user's preference for type of content (e.g., romance, thrillers, mysteries, etc).
Episode Thumbnails	On the TV show interface, Netflix displays thumbnail images of each episode as a series, allowing users to identify and select the episodes they want to watch quickly.
Exit Option	Provides an easily identifiable "exit" or "logout" option, allowing users to exit the platform or log out when finished.
Subtitles and Audio Settings	Explicit labelling of subtitle and audio settings options for international or accessibility purposes allows users to define their viewing experience.
Link to Social Media	Netflix allows users to share what they watch on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Users can choose to post about shows or movies they have watched for social interaction.
Teleparty	A third-party browser extension that allows users to synchronize their playback and watch Netflix content simultaneously with friends.
Ratings	While not a direct social interaction, users' ratings and recommendations indirectly contribute to a collective sense of shared viewing experiences. Users' ratings can influence the recommendations for others and vice versa.

Affordances frequently rely on the related use of signifiers, to provide a recognizable visual clue of the purpose of a particular features function. An example of the relationship between signifiers and affordances can be seen on social media sites in the use of the 'like' function, where the thumbs-up hand symbol is a signifier of the function of being able to express approval – now widely recognizable and an understood interactive mechanism used across online platforms. Another increasingly common affordance on time-based media websites is the automatic previewing – or animation – of a video when the user 'hovers' over a static image. Although there is no signifier of this function, it is a common feature across sites with rich media content, such as news broadcasters, YouTube, Netflix, TikTok, Daily Motion, even on iPhone photos. Accordingly, affordances promote interaction and participation by making users feel a certain extent of control in the user experience.

Table 5. Triplet of Netflix UX

Affordances	Contexts		User Needs
Autoplay	User	Multitasking, Taste Track	Hedonic
Posters	Platform	Control Interaction	
	User	Taste Track	
Play Button	Platform		

Hover Over Preview		Control Interaction	
Episode Thumbnails			
Recommendations	Environment	Spare Time	Temporal
My List			
Content Navigation			
User Profiles	Environment	Social Watching	Functional
Exit Option	Platform	Control Interaction	
Subtitles and Audio Settings	Environment	Users Location	
Link to Social Media	Environment	Social Watching	Social
Teleparty			
Ratings	Platform	Feedback	

Table 5 outlines how Netflix's affordances are linked to one of the four themes of user needs, and set in one of the contexts categories. In addition, if all affordances, contexts, and user needs are connected, one narrative may be configured. For example, the affordance called User Profiles could be reflected in the following short narratives.

Users tend to use Netflix by sharing one account with others, and each user has a different taste and viewing history, so they want to customize their account. They can set their user types within one account and separate the viewing experience through User Profiles on Netflix. By doing so, users can check what their family or friends watch while maintaining their taste, and they can also reduce the cost they pay through account sharing (a function recently restricted).

Such narratives represent affordances related to user needs and serve to form user contexts simultaneously. In other words, there is no priority among affordances, contexts, and user needs; all three elements are intrinsically connected to create a positive user experience.

5. User experience for continuous brand experience

Affordances therefore enable users to navigate interfaces effectively and interact with new platforms intuitively, enhancing the user experience and thus the brand experience. This is particularly important for online brands, where the principal point of difference is the interface for accessing content – this is especially true of platforms that have a limited selection of their own original content. One of the reasons behind Netflix's global dominance in the streaming services is due to the connection between the brand experience and the user experience. Additionally Netflix recognized that original content solely available via the Netflix platform would represent a unique brand experience. The features of the interface that

automatically leads to the next episode without interruption encourages a continuation of engagement with the brand through binge-watching content. The affordances of Netflix demonstrate how, through the use of optimised recommendations, auto-play functions, user profile settings, and hover functions, contribute to the encouragement of habitual and prolonged engagement with the service, and therefore the brand.

6. Conclusion

While the fascination with different perspectives of experience has shifted focus throughout the evolution of marketing, the underlying goal has been to deliver distinctive and satisfying customer experience. This chapter has illustrated how the different forms of experience has now largely coalesced around the notion that user experience is highly influential for shaping brand experience. As brand touchpoints become increasingly digital and interconnected, user interface design becomes conducive to the user experience. The challenge for brands therefore is to deliver a seamless and consistent brand experience over digital touchpoints, across different platforms. Reaching this level of continuity is dependent upon brands being able to provide a satisfying user experience across the multitude of applications, and thus user experience becomes the critical and instrumental point of interaction that seamlessly connects users with brands.

The efficacy of user experience across online platforms is based on three principles of UX design: user needs, contexts, and affordances. By understanding and connecting user needs to the contexts and affordances, brands are better able to enhance the online experience for their users. Translating these principles across the platforms and interfaces becomes an essential requirement for continuity of brand experience.

While this chapter has discussed how UX has become central to the experience of brands and enables users optimization and control, there remains other significant aspects of brand experience that will continue to be similarly important for achieving an enjoyable brand experience.

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