Experience with the Second-Generation Online Brands: Online-Only Brand Experience

-Master Thesis-

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Abstract

Title	Experience with the Second Generation of Online Brands: Online-Only Brand Experience
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Keywords	Online-only brand experience, brand experience, online marketing, online branding, Millennial generation;
Thesis Purpose	The purpose of this thesis is to deepen the knowledge in the phenomenon of brand experience by exploring components of online-only brand experience.
Methodology	A social-constructivist and interpretivist perspective guided the research to adopt a qualitative strategy with exploratory and phenomenological stance. Following an abductive approach and the hermeneutic circle technique, existing knowledge of offline brand experience served as guidance during the continuous interplay of data collection and analysis.
Theoretical Perspective	This research study builds on existing theoretical knowledge in the field of online marketing, online branding, Millennial generation, offline brand experience and online brand experience. The framework created illustrates the interplay of those and guides subsequent data analysis.
Empirical Data	Empirical data was gathered through nine in-depth pair friendship interviews (18 interviewees in total), where participants reported their experiences with seven different online-only brands, belonging to four different categories (entertainment, information, communication and database brands).
Findings	The research reveals six components of online-only brand experience, namely, sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, social and technical experiences. Technical experiences are revealed to be the most influential component. Research further suggests that triggers under each component stem from the brand itself and/or during the consumption process of service provided. Besides, research shows the most influential components within brand experiences of examined four online-only brand categories.

-Acknowledgement-

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1. INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this thesis is to deepen the knowledge of the phenomenon of brand experience with online-only brands through the exploration of consumers' experiences with those brands. This exploratory study, undertaking a phenomenological stance, will contribute to existing literature by revealing components of brand experience with online-only brands.

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1.1. FROM RISE OF THE INTERNET TO ONLINE-ONLY BRANDS

Over the years, one of the main challenges marketers have been facing was adaptability, be it to overcome cultural differences in new markets or to react to shifting consumer demands. However, brand management in the 21st century became more complex than ever before (Dinnie, 2005). This century is marked by technological advancements, such as the rise of the Internet and related technologies, that radically transformed global branding (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013) and brought new challenges such as 'faster innovation, growing competition, complexity and more demanding consumers' (Hamzah, Syed Alwi & Othman, 2014, p. 2299).

Inevitably, these changing market conditions and consumer demands have forced marketers to shift overall brand focus towards the new digital environment (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014). As a result, not only traditional brick and mortar brands started to increasingly digitalize, but this changing business environment also resulted in the emergence of aggressively growing Internet brands that are putting many traditional and well-known brands in jeopardy (Dayal, Landesberg & Zeisser, 2000). The immense power and increasing growth of Internet brands can be illustrated by the following facts: Firstly, brand values of such Internet companies are fast growing in the stock markets (Doffou, 2014). For instance, Facebook's stock grew 38% over the course of 2014 (Clarke, 2015). Secondly, the expected compound annual sales growth rate of the business to consumer e-commerce is set at 18.2% from 2013 to 2018 (Statista, 2015). Thirdly, increasingly more Internet brands are placed among the 'top 100 world's most valuable brands' (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). To name but a few: Google, takes place among top three most valuable brands in the world with an approximate brand worth of $159 billion as of May 2014 (Rooney, 2014); Uber, being one of the world's most valuable startups with an

approximate brand worth of $41,2 billion and Spotify, showing a value of $4 billion, as of March 2015 (Austin, Canipe & Slobin, 2015).

As a consequence of the significant shift towards today's digital era, 'new' types of brands have been springing up like mushrooms - brands that are present only online. Kapferer (2012) calls Facebook, Google and Amazon pure online brands and characterizes these Internet brands as brands that serve users instead of clients; that promise price advantages, provide experiences, are constantly updating, and are easy to globalize. In this thesis, the definition of an Internet brand is further extended to the so-called online-only brands, or second generation online brands, which are distinguished by the fact that they do not provide any tangible product or brand experience outside their online context. In contrast to Kapferer's definition (2012) in which the Internet giant Amazon is defined as an online brand, it cannot be categorized as an online-only brand, because it still may provide offline experience such as delivery and consumption of the physical product. Nevertheless, considering the assigned characteristics of online brands (Kapferer, 2012), the same characteristics of online-only brands can be taken and are applicable throughout.

However, the rise of the digital technologies have not only influenced global branding, but subsequently also shaped society: Internet has been weaving its way into every aspect of Western human life and has changed people's' everyday routines - arising trends such as continuing technological developments and increasing interconnectedness, for instance, have impacted how the social worlds functions and forced societies to continuously adapt to these changing times. As part of this social change, overall consumer behavior has undergone significant changes that have resulted in today's economically, politically and socially empowered consumers (Corvi, Bigi & Ng, 2007; Blattberg, 2014). This holds especially true for the generation that has been raised during the early stage of today's digital era and was in turn heavily influenced and shaped by the Internet (Gursoy, Maier & Chi, 2008 - the generation of the so-called Millennials. As the Millennials depict today's largest generation, those consumers possess the greatest consumption power in today's society (Latif, Uckun & Demir, 2015).

Facing the aforementioned marketing evolvement towards a highly digitalized business environment and the continuously changing consumer behavior, marketers have been forced to adjust their activities: Nowadays, strong brands have to serve consumers' emotional desire and constant quest for experiences; desires which traditional marketing tools, which are based on

the physical benefits of products are not able to satisfy. It is indeed the concept of brand experience that is considered the 'hottest' topic within branding these days (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014): It is the most important tool for creating brand attractiveness (Jevons, Gabbott & de Chernatony, 2000), it can lead to greater customer satisfaction and happiness (Gilovich, Kumar & Jampol, 2015), and allows brands to differentiate in the prevailing competitive environment (Cleff, Lin & Walter, 2014). In today's online branding, functional benefits but also experiences are parts from brand's essence (Cleff, Lin & Walter, 2014). In short: Brands present online have to create and manage memorable and holistic brand experiences (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014) - for the simple reason that:

'On the World Wide Web, the brand is the experience and the experience is the brand'

(Dayal, Landesberg & Zeisser, 2000, p. 42)

1.2. PROBLEM FORMULATION AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

As mentioned before, the rampant development of the Internet over the last decade has resulted in a wide landscape of online brands and opened up the significant growth of online-only brands. At the same time, the concept of brand experience (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009) has been increasingly considered to be one of the most important topics within branding and is currently shaping academia as well as the practical business environment. In today's digital era, the need for creating and managing consumers' brand experience with these booming online-only brands becomes crucial. Surprisingly, taking in consideration the topic's urgency, we face scarce academic research within the field of online brand experience. Consequently, no coherent framework has been developed that clearly illustrates the nature of online-only brand experience.

In order to illustrate this gap in theory, we will further present previously conducted research within this area. It can be seen that in theory, the necessity to gain an understanding of the nature of experiences in consumer behavior has increasingly attracted attention among academics and practitioners up to now. Pioneers in this context were Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) by acknowledging the importance of experiences in the overall consumption process. Based on this, Pine II and Gilmore (1998) as well as Schmitt (1999) provided customer experience frameworks for the first time ever. These conceptualizations built the basis for the emergence of the brand experience concept as such. Indeed, ten years later, Brakus, Schmitt

and Zarantonello (2009) extended these early works by introducing a brand experience conceptualization and measurements, and eventually proving diverse components of brand experience in an offline context. In contrast to this research focus on the nature of brand experience, we note that subsequent empirical research mainly investigated the relationship between brand experience and other brand constructs and no attempts were made to further extend the knowledge of the nature of brand experience. For instance, existing research explores the impact of experience on satisfaction (Ishida & Taylor, 2012; Chahal & Dutta, 2015), brand equity (Cleff, Lin & Walter, 2014; Chahal & Dutta, 2015), word-of-mouth (Chahal & Dutta, 2015), brand personality and loyalty (Ishida & Taylor, 2012).

However, unlike the relatively well-researched area of brand experience in the traditional brick-and-mortar commerce, the phenomenon of brand experience in the online environment is studied to a lesser extent, even though the topic is heavily discussed as being a critical marketing asset for facilitating online business (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014). Notably, since the first acknowledgements of the important role brand experience plays on the Internet (Schmitt, 2000), no empirical study has revealed relevant constituents of brand experience in this context. Existing studies in the field of experience on the Internet do not focus on 'brand experience' as such, but rather investigate components of 'online consumer experience' (Novak, Hoffman & Yung, 2000) or 'Website brand experience' (Constantinides, 2004; Ha & Perks, 2005). However, these types of experiences cannot be used interchangeably (Ishida & Taylor, 2012; Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014), even if they are closely related (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). More interestingly, some empirical research has been conducted on the nature of online brand experience in relation to corporate brands (Hamzah, Syed Alwi & Othman, 2014), but neither to online product or service nor online-only brands. Even recently, Limba, Kiskis and Jurkute (2014) stressed the missing consistency in existing conceptualizations that would describe the nature of online brand experience.

The review of existing literature indicates that past investigations of online brand experience mainly focused on online brands that offer tangible products or physical experiences as well, such as Amazon, but not on the new generation of online-only brands, providing nothing else than virtual experience. Indeed, to the best of our knowledge, no research deals with the phenomena of brand experience with online-only brands. Further research is needed that would fill this theoretical gap and explore the nature of online-only brand experience. Besides, the practical importance of a study within this area can be illustrated by the fact that due to this lack

of established theory, practitioners cannot utilize well-established frameworks for creating and managing brand experience in the online environment (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014).

Hence, the aim of this study is to investigate what brand experience consists of in a purely online environment. We aim to accomplish this by exploring individual experiences of representatives of the Millennial generation with such online-only brands, and by investigating the relevance of traditional brick-and-mortar brand experience components in a purely digital environment. The aforementioned Millennial generation has been chosen to lie in the center of investigation not only because they are currently representing the largest population and possess immense consumption power, but also because they experience online-only brands on a routine basis, and are regarding digital technology as second nature (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014; Lantos, 2014).

The research question that will guide this study is:

How does the Millennial generation experience online-only brands?

The research aims at revealing the components that shape online-only brand experience and at conceptualizing them into a framework of online-only brand experience. This theoretical contribution is aimed to be translated into managerial implications with suggestions on what components managers should use when creating strong and positive online-only brand experiences.

The research study poses certain limitations that should be addressed. First, the study is scrutinizing one particular group within the Millennial generation, the group of highly globalized Millennials only, and thus excluding not only other generations, but also not taking into consideration the whole generation. Second, the study is examining a limited number of online-only brands and consequently not studying brands representing all possible online-only brand categories.

1.3. THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis is divided into six chapters. In this first chapter, we have introduced the topic of investigation and the study's focus. Besides, the prevailing gap in both academia and practice has been presented and a clear research question has been formulated. In the theory chapter, we will highlight the theoretical background relevant to online marketing, branding and the Millennial generation, in which the study is embedded. This will be followed by a deep literature review on the existing state of research of the brand experience concept, both in an offline and online context. Through this, we aim at providing the reader with a deeper understanding of the concept, by revealing findings that show components of offline brand experience and the state of research in online brand experience. Next, the methodological chapter will unveil the researchers' philosophical stance, the research strategy and the applied research method, and will explain the data analysis process. The data analysis chapter will present our qualitatively gathered empirical data, followed by an in-depth discussion, which will answer the research question. Lastly, we will draw conclusions and note the limitations encountered during the research. In addition to providing managerial and theoretical implications, the thesis aims to lay down foundations for further research.

2. THEORY

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This chapter introduces the theoretical framework, which relates to the online-only brand experience concept. Firstly, existing literature in relation to online marketing, branding and Millennial generation will be reviewed. Secondly, the concept of brand experience will be introduced and previous conceptualizations will be presented. Hence, this chapter aims to deepen the understanding of the concept and current state of knowledge in the field of brand experience, in both offline and online environment. Finally, a summary of the presented theoretical background will be provided in order to guide the study.

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2.1. ONLINE MARKETING

Later investigation in online-only brand experience requires a first insight in the specifics of the online business environment. For this reason, the theoretical chapter will be introduced by a brief outline of the concept of online marketing.

2.1.1. Changing World of Marketing

Marketing as a topic concept was born in the early 1950s, when a revolutionary discovery of its time was made: In order to increase sales, one has to satisfy consumer needs better than competitors do (Strauss & Frost, 1999). Since then, following the societal changes, the way marketing is carried out has been developing. In order to understand today's notion of marketing concept as such, we will look at the short, but precise explanation: 'Activities that bring buyers and sellers together so they can make exchanges that deliver satisfaction value to all parties. Marketing is a profession, process, and practice' (Siegel, 2004, p. 3). The so-called marketing guru Philip Kotler goes further and offers a more detailed and comprehensive definition: 'Marketing is the science and art of exploring, creating, and delivering value to satisfy the needs of a target market at a profit. Marketing identifies unfulfilled needs and desires. It defines, measures and quantifies the size of the identified market and the profit potential. It pinpoints which segments the company is capable of serving best and it designs and promotes the appropriate products and services' (Kotler, 2015, n.p).

Over the last two decades, fundamental changes in science and society have happened that have been brought by the fast growing use of Internet and related technological developments. Subsequently, it has led to fundamental changes in the world of marketing (Wind, 2008). The global marketplace has been transformed, world has become borderless, and marketers are facing more vibrant and interconnected environments where time zones have disappeared and communication have become immediate (Berthon et al., 2012). Since its introduction, Internet has been growing faster than any other technology or medium in history (Richardson, 2000), and consequently prompting changes in the world of business and everyday life faster than any other human invention before (Siegel, 2004). In fact, availability of the Internet connection to world's population grew from less than 1% in 1995 to approximately 40% as of today, with more than 3 billion people using the Internet worldwide (as of 8 April 2015; Internetlivestats, 2015), and this number is constantly growing. Naturally the Internet has enabled marketers to reach an enormous amount of people in almost every nation on earth in a relatively short period of time. For this reason in today's digital world, Internet is used as the major communication tool between brands and their customers (Kapferer, 2012), and is thus considered the greatest and most significant tool in marketing for the global marketplace (Samiee, 1998).

In fact, continuous Internet and technological development has brought the greatest revolution in marketing history, which happened just one decade ago with the shift from Web 1.0 to 2.0 (Wind, 2008; Berthon et al., 2012; Mata & Quesada, 2014). Web 2.0 triggered a significant change: Marketing evolved from a linear and one-directional process to a chaotic and interactive ecosystem (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013) - this facilitated the evolvement of online marketing as we know it today.

2.1.2. Online Marketing Definition and Key Characteristics

Online marketing, also called Internet marketing, Web marketing or digital marketing, can be defined as the set of methods and tools that deliver promotional marketing messages to consumers using the Internet (Siegel, 2004), and is categorized in social media marketing, email marketing, search engine marketing, different types of display advertising, and mobile advertising, for instance (Williams, 2012). By comparing this definition with the traditional marketing definition shown above, it becomes clear that the overall goal of online marketing remains the same as in traditional marketing (Siegel, 2004). Nevertheless, the rise of the Internet has led to significant changes in marketing, and the Internet's main characteristics have

strongly impacted the way marketing is performed in an online environment, since 'on the Internet, everything we know about marketing is out the window' (Gerret, n.d. in Lindstrom & Andersen, 2000, p. 27). In order to illustrate the point, some of online marketing's main characteristics are detailed below; they can pose both threats and opportunities at the same time (Berthon et al., 2012; Mata & Quesada, 2014).

To begin with, Internet's main characteristic that defines the different ways marketing is done online is its 24-hour availability, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Accordingly, online information is always available and can be found any time. On the one hand, this results in the advantage that stores never close, also called 'time utility', and consumers are able to make purchases at all times, called 'possession utility' (Siegel, 2004). On the other hand, round-the-clock information availability poses threats as it facilitates transparency: Consumers are able to compare prices, products and services that increases consumer power and intensifies overall competition, which in turn is not always favorable to the companies (Siegel, 2004).

Secondly, online marketing is characterized by the Internet's intangible nature: This provides both marketers and customers with an opportunity to customize products and services on a much greater scale than offline (called 'form utility'), and additionally allows businesses to deliver virtual products and services directly to consumers' devices that are connected to the Internet, such as news or weather prognoses (called 'place utility'; Siegel, 2004). At the same time, the intangible environment of the Internet leads to one major online marketing disadvantage: Consumers are not able to sense the product in the same way as offline, by trying, touching or smelling it (Janssen, 2015).

Thirdly, even though Internet consumers often are the same as offline consumers, their behavior in the online environment differs (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014), and subsequently impacts how marketing is done in this environment. Today's consumers do not necessarily connect through brand created media channels only, but also through digital channels that are out of retailer's control (Edelmann, 2010; Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). In contrast to the offline environment, online consumers engage with brands as if they were their friends by actually being friends on Facebook, followers on Twitter and YouTube, and other online communities. In the online environment, consumers do not appreciate if brands are trying to sell rather than engage (Fournier & Avery, 2011). More importantly, after the consumption, consumers might stay highly engaged with the brands, not only by following them on social

media, but also by promoting, discussing, sharing, complaining, creating their own content, and eventually shaping the image of the brand. This leads to a highly participative role of the consumer (Christodoulides, 2009; Edelmann, 2010), which in turn results in an increased consumer empowerment - a significant development for online marketing and one of its main characteristics (Wind, 2008).

Fourthly, online marketing benefits from the broader scope of marketing elements offered: The Internet and related digital technologies provide additional marketing tools. For instance, such tools are various digital technologies and programs that help to reach and categorize target audience, store and analyze data, organize information, manage social media (Janssen, 2015).

To sum it up, online marketing significantly differs from traditional marketing - the main difference lies in the way marketing activities are performed. The Internet's characteristics of intangibility, round-the-clock availability, broad range of marketing elements and empowered consumers have a significant impact on the accomplishment of online marketing activities, since both benefits and risks arise out of its online nature. In today's world, everything that is marketed offline, can also be bought online (Siegel, 2004), which stresses the role online marketing plays for marketers even more.

2.2. BROUGHT UP WITH THE INTERNET: THE MILLENNIALS

The Internet revolution did not only fundamentally influence marketing activities, but also had an impact on society: It has shaped a new generation, the so called 'Millennials' (Latif, Uckun & Demir, 2015). It is interesting to explore this particular generation within our thesis due to the fact that this is the first generation ever that were brought up under the influence of the Internet revolution or, so to speak, they were born into the high-tech (Raines, 2002; The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014).

2.2.1. Defining Millennials

People belonging to this generation have been born approximately between 1980 and 2000 (Corvi, Bigi & Ng, 2007; Motivaction International, 2014). Also, various authors assign different names when describing this particular generation, some of the most commonly found in literature are: 'Digital Natives', 'Net Generation', 'Generation Y', 'Echo Boomers', 'N-Geners', 'Nexters', 'Internet Generation' or 'Generation 2000' (Srinivasan, 2012; Dimitriou & Blum, 2015).

For the purpose of this thesis we will continue to use the term 'Millennials', thereby following the majority of literature.

Another important fact to mention is that Millennials around the world can be divided into two groups: Local and global Millennials. Millennials that are primarily local and national focused are strongly embedded into culture and various lifestyle patterns, whereas globalized Millennials are the ones that are most active on the Internet as well as in cultural and consumer activities (Motivaction International, 2014). Hence, for the purpose of this study we will focus on the highly globalized Millennials that live or have lived abroad, travel and use digitals tools in their everyday life.

2.2.2. Characteristics of Millennials

As any other generation, Millennials possess specific characteristics that have been shaped by the environment they were brought up in (Corvi, Bigi & Ng, 2007; US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2012; The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). This particular generation is said to be noticeably unique compared to foregoing generations (Corvi, Bigi & Ng, 2007): First, Millennials possess greater economic, political and social power than previous generations, due to the empowerment of the Internet (Corvi, Bigi & Ng, 2007; Blattberg, 2014). Second, in comparison to any previous generation they are also perceived as more economically secure, healthier (Srinivasan, 2012), as well as the most educated generation (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). Third, the Millennial generation is the biggest generation up to date (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014), featuring 2 billion Millennial consumers (Motivaction International, 2014), with an immense purchasing power: In 2014, their purchasing power was of approximately 200$ billion, only in the US (Lantos, 2014).

In general, the Millennial generation possesses such characteristics as: 'Sociable, optimistic, talented, well-educated, collaborative, open-minded, influential, and achievement-oriented. 'They've always felt sought after, needed, and indispensable' (Raines, 2002, p. 1). In contrast to other generations, Millennials appreciate work-life balance in order to fulfill their hobbies and interests outside their professional life (Armour, 2005; US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2012). Even though Millennials are work-focused (Corvi, Bigi & Ng, 2007), work does not play a dominant role in their life. Besides, they possess a strong entrepreneurial spirit, which can be illustrated by the fact that over 50% of graduates see their future in self-employment (The

Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). This might be one of the explanations for the currently booming number of startups and application developers, as well as the general trend that more people tend to work from home through the Internet medium than ever before (Clifford, 2013; Mielach, 2013; Schawbel, 2013).

For this generation, technology and various digital tools are second nature (Godwin-Jones, 2005) and thus seen as a self-evident in their daily life. In contrast, people belonging to the precedent generation, called 'Digital Immigrants', do not have the same level of comfort, commitment or awareness of technologies, even though they are keen to adopt the new digital know-how (Godwin-Jones, 2005). Naturally the way Millennials utilize digital tools and behave in the so-called 'third space', being neither school, work or home, differs from previous generations. Millennials possess greater enthusiasm for instant messaging, peer-to-peer file sharing or video gaming, while those activities are often perceived as a waste of time by older generations (Godwin-Jones, 2005). The power of the Millennials lies in the combination of their ability and willingness to share personal opinion with large audiences (Srinivasan, 2012). Additionally, this digitally-savvy generation consumes Internet and related technologies not only differently, but also to a greater extent than other generations. In fact, it is the only generation that consumes digital media more than any other media such as TV or newspapers, for instance (MarketingCharts, 2014; Motivaction International, 2014). Two-thirds of Millennials shop online and almost four out of ten have their own video console; when it comes to online shopping, general planning or sharing of information or experience, Millennials heavily rely on the Internet and digital tools (Yesawich, 2008).

2.3. BRANDS AND BRANDING IN DIGITAL AGE

Due to the changes the Internet brought to the marketing and business environment, branding has become more important than ever before in history (Chiang, Lin & Wang, 2008).

2.3.1. Internet Brandsphere

Today, we live in a branded society, where brands are everywhere we look. Only recently managers have realized that the real value of companies lies in consumers' mind rather than within tangible assets (Kapferer, 2012). More importantly, a strong brand can indeed be the most valuable asset a company owns (Melin, 2002; Weitz & Wensley, 2002). Nowadays, brands are even acknowledged to be part of a company's capital (Kapferer, 2012).

The concept of branding, starting as the mere sign of possession and distinguisher in the past (Landa, 2006), has evolved over time; interestingly, today the definition of a 'brand' is one of the strongest disagreement points among experts (Kapferer, 2012). In order to facilitate readers' deeper understanding we will further look at one of the most comprehensive definitions that describes the meaning of 'brand' in today's world, which is provided by the American Marketing Association: A brand is a 'name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers' (American Marketing Association, 2014, n.p.).

Together with the previously mentioned Internet developments and the following emergence of Web 2.0, brandsphere has undergone significant and even fundamental changes (Edelmann, 2010), and the role brands play in this environment has increasingly gained significance (Rowley, 2004; Chiang, Lin & Wang, 2008). The reasons for this are two aforementioned specific features of the online environment: Internet provides consumers with an overload of information (Cohen, 2011) and serves as a fast moving marketplace, where no physical interaction with the product happens (Rowley, 2004). In order to counter the first feature, brands are forced to compete for consumers' time and attention: On the Internet, strong brands can provide shortcuts in consumers' minds and thus saving time and reducing costs of search (Cohen, 2011), therefore branding enables to provide continuity and customer loyalty.

Overall, online branding is characterized by the consumers' active participation and co-creation with the brand, where the consumer is involved in the primary stage of the brand building process (Christodoulides, 2009), and where brand experience is created through all points of interaction between the brand and the consumer (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2004). Indeed, as mentioned above, the online environment is characterized by a high level of interconnectedness (Berthon et al., 2007; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013) that results in increasing consumer power, leaving passive consumption in history (Berthon et al., 2007; Wind, 2008; Kapferer, 2012; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013). Nevertheless, this interaction is marked by an impersonal notion (i.e. no face-to-face contact; Rose, Hair & Clark, 2011). In contrast to the past where companies owned their own brands, consumers are shaping brand image and determining prices in today's world; this furthermore illustrates the enormous consumer power in online marketing and branding (Cohen, 2011; ETalks, 2013). Therefore, successful online brand strategies should build relationships with the consumers, enable real-time interactivity, and tailor their offer by carefully listening to them (de Chernatony

& Christodoulides, 2004 in Christodoulides, 2009), and respectively create brand experience for its consumers.

Positive online brand experience can result in such benefits as positive brand image, it can add to brand's equity, and fosters users to return to the brand, and also encourage favorable word of mouth that is way more powerful in brand building than any other advertisement means (Siegel, 2004). More importantly, a brand in today's world is not what company says it is, but rather what it does - and even more: a brand is how its customer experiences what it does (Rowley, 2004) - delivering experience is the overall goal.

2.3.2. Online-Only Brands Defined

Compared to the companies that exist both in an online and offline environment, defined as 'bricks and click', new forms of business have emerged out of the changing business environment, and have started to build their existence exclusively in the online environment, called 'click only' (Siegel, 2004). In this context, it is important to note that literature traditionally considers the 'click only' bands as online or Internet brands. Kapferer (2012), for instance, refers to Internet brands as brands that might also provide some sort of offline service. Surprisingly, no clear online brand definition has been provided so far; however, it can be adapted from the online marketing definition, which states that online marketing is marketing that delivers promotional messages to consumers using the Internet (Siegel, 2004). Accordingly, online brands can be categorized as brands that provide their products and services mainly using the Internet.

In this thesis we aim to go one step further by defining recently growing powerful type of brands which we call online-only or second generation online brands. We define online-only brands as brands which business models are exclusively built in the online environment. Hence, without the Internet medium, those brands would not exist. Contrasting traditional perception of online brands, online-only brands differ by the fact that they do not provide any offline experience or tangible end-product. As for example, while Amazon's business model is built online, it still provides offline experience, namely the delivery of the final product that customers can compare to the picture and description, thus providing offline experience.

Further, in order to better illustrate our explanation of such brands, we summarized some exemplary online-only brands by placing them under different categories shown below:

Table 1: Online-Only Bands and Their Categories			
Type of Brand	**Description**	**Example**	**Offline Alternative**
Information Brands			
Online Encyclopedia	Encyclopedia available online. An encyclopedia is 'a reference work that contains information about many different subjects or a lot of information about a particular subject' (Merriam-Webster, 2015b, n.p.). Used in order to gain knowledge.	Wikipedia; Encyclopedia Britannica;	Book - encyclopedia
Online Dictionary	Dictionary available online. A dictionary is 'a reference source in print or electronic form containing words usually alphabetically arranged along with information about their forms, pronunciations, functions, etymologies, meanings, and syntactical and idiomatic uses' (Merriam-Webster, 2015a, n.p.). Used in order to gain knowledge.	Wikopedia; Merriam-Webstar; American Marketing Association	Print dictionary
Search Engine	A search engine is 'a program that indexes documents, then attempts to match documents relevant to the user's' search requests. Search engine can refer to the program on an individual site, or those on broad Internet sites such as Google, Yahoo! and MSN' (American Marketing Association, 2015, n.p.). Used in order to gain knowledge or compare information.	Google; Bing; Yahoo; Skyscanner	No
Entertainment Brand			
Media Stream	Brands providing media, such as video or music. 'Streaming or media streaming is a technique for	Spotify; iTunes; Deezer;	Tapes; CD; vinila plates; Video rental;

	transferring data so that it can be processed as a steady and continuous stream' (Beal, 2015c, n.p.).	Nepster; Netflix;	
Online Games	'Electronic game playing over a computer network, particularly over the Internet' (Ray, 2015, n.p.)	Candy Crash; League of Legends;	Game consoles: Xbox, Wii, Sony playstation
Gaming Platform and Library	'Game platform that distributes and manages [...] games in online environment' (Valve Corporation, 2015b, n.p.).	Steam; Origin; Uplay; GOG;	No
Social Media			
Social Media	'Social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content' (Kietzmann et al., 2011, p. 241).	Facebook; Twitter; Instagram; LinkedIn; Pinterest; Youtube;	No
Database Brands			
Database	'Database, also called electronic database, any collection of data, or information, that is specially organized for rapid search and retrieval by a computer. Databases are structured to facilitate the storage, retrieval, modification, and deletion of data in conjunction with various data-processing operations' (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013, n.p).	Dropbox; Google Drive; iCloud;	USB, CD,
Communication Brands			
E-mail Services	Electronic mail services, 'also known as webmail, online email service providers enable users to send, receive and review e-mail from their Web browsers. Email services offer easy access and storage of email messages for users who are not connected to the Internet from their usual location'	Gmail; Hotmail; Yahoo Mail; GMX	Letters

	(Beal, 2015a, n.p.).		
Communication Service	These brands' main offering is to be used as a digital communication medium among users through the Internet including both 'voice over Internet Protocol [which] is a category of hardware and software that enables people to use the Internet as the transmission medium for telephone calls' (Beal, 2015d, n.p.), e.g. direct communication by video calls, and instant messaging which is 'a type of communications service that enables you to create a kind of private chat room with another individual in order to communicate in real time over the Internet' (Beal, 2015b, n.p.), e.g. chat, messaging or mail sending/receiving.	Skype; Viber; whatsapp,	Phone

To sum it up, as it was previously discussed and also shown in this table, digitization - with its online-only brands - is effectively weaving its way into every facet of people's everyday life. People became connected as never before and businesses connect to people in a different way. This is said to be the 'Age of Experience' that is now driving the path of the new era of omnipresent computing (Interbrand, 2014).

2.4. WHAT ARE EXPERIENCES?

As we have learned in the previous sections, creating experiences on the Web is pivotal for brands operating in an online environment, and obviously even more for online-only brands – since experience is the only offering they provide. However, in a first step, we need to discover what is commonly meant by this rather abstract term. Over the last three decades, the term 'experience' has been mentioned, discussed and conceptualized in business context by both practitioners and scholars; be it in relation to customer experience, shopping experience, brand experience, web experience, for instance. However, before digging deeper into any concept, we need to understand the pure meaning and characteristics of 'experience', regardless of the context.

The concept of experience is not clearly defined and often different meanings are ascribed to the term 'experience' itself (Carú & Cova, 2003). In order to grasp the underlying meaning of the term as such, we will look at the basic definition by Britannica World Language dictionary: 'Experience is the knowledge derived from one's own action, practice perception, enjoyment, or suffering; experimental knowledge; especially, the state of such knowledge in an individual as an index of wisdom or skill: He is a lawyer of experience' (Preble, 1959, p. 447). For the purpose of this thesis, definition of experience is further interpreted as follows: Experience is the inner knowledge or skill resulting from a subjective perception, action or behavior. Indeed, the term is frequently applied to describe a person's experience during everyday life (Carú & Cova, 2003).

Despite the lack of a clear definition, some key characteristics of experiences should be stated in order to further enhance the understanding of this term. Firstly, it can be noted that both existing views on experience concept, either academic or practical, include individual customer in the pivotal role (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998), and emphasize its subjective nature (Rowley, 2004). Besides, it is stated that experiences results from the interaction between a subject, i.e. the consumer, and object, i.e. the provider, as well as the co-creation process among these two (Poulsson & Kale, 2004). Furthermore, experiences can be defined as ordinary or extraordinary, and can be divided into consumer or consumption experiences (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009) as well as into product experiences or shopping/service experiences (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). In contrast to fungible commodities, tangible products and intangible services, experiences are memorable. This implicates that experiences are personal and not external as products or services, hence existing uniquely in the mind of each consumer (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998). In addition, experiences can also be virtual (activated in an online environment) and/or live brand experiences (Smilansky, 2009). In this regard, live brand experiences are defined as 'a two-way interaction between a brand and its target audience that can be equally successful across events as well as many interactive technologies and platforms that facilitate communication between consumers and brands in real time' (Smilansky, 2009, p. 256). Besides, experiences can further be divided into individual (sense, feel and think experiences) and shared (act and relate) experiences (Schmitt, 1999), where individual experiences significantly impact on shared ones (Chang & Chieng, 2006).

Considering the current state of unclear definitions and sometimes ambiguous facets of 'experience', it becomes clear that there is indeed a prevailing disagreement between

academics and practitioners in this context. In fact, this disagreement has never been so wide (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). One reason for this lack of clarity can be seen in the ambiguity of the term itself, as 'experience' is used as both a noun and a verb. Hence, there is no clarity whether consumers experience actively (experience as a verb) or passively (experience as a noun), whether the process itself must lead to an outcome or not (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009).

With regard to our exploration, the term 'experience' is considered as a verb, which will allow us to answer the previously raised research question. This results from our focus that lies in scrutinizing how Millennials experience online-only brands. Hence, the individual's subjective experience process will be explored rather than revealing types of different experiences (which would be the focus from a noun-view). By doing so, consumer's virtual experiences, which might both be individual and/or shared that arise from the interaction among the individual and the brand will be the center of this research study. In order to broaden our understanding of the concept of 'experience', it is crucial to outline the theoretical development thereof. This will allow us to gain a deeper knowledge of the brand experience concept, by understanding its evolvement over time - which is the concept that lies in the absolute center of this thesis.

2.5. SHIFT FROM SERVICE ECONOMY TO EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

The stream of academic research on experiences was launched by the influential work by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), in which experiential aspects in the consumption process were recognized for the first time: Fantasies, feelings and fun play a meaningful role and deeply shape consumers' decision-making process. This experiential view on consumers' decision making stresses the symbolic meanings, nonverbal stimuli and subconscious experiences in the consumption process. Hence, this perspective is contrasting the previously prevailing information processing view, which asserted that consumers focus on product's attributes, that they were logical thinkers and only aimed at rationally solving problems during the decision-making process (Bettman, 1979 in Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Based on this view, Pine II and Gilmore (1998) argue that today's economy is the so-called 'experience economy' which is the result of the ongoing transition from the most recent service economy and the consequent shift in consumers' behaviors: In the past, consumers desired service offerings - today, they increasingly seek experiences, in addition to and distinct from getting offered products and/or services (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998). The authors emphasize the

role of experiences in the consumption process, and the need for businesses to consider that 'an experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event' (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98). By focusing on creating superior experience, brands and companies are able to clearly differentiate in today's competitive world, to bring personality to a brand, to create brand advocacy (in form of positive word-of-mouth), and subsequently strong brand relationship (mainly because of the two-way communications) as well as to attribute meaningful brand values to the brand (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998). Following this reasoning, Pine II and Gilmore are the first to introduce a customer experience concept, which aims to support businesses in designing and managing engaging experiences.

Pine II and Gilmore's (1998) customer experience framework attributes distinct qualities to experiences and categorizes them along two bipolar dimensions, namely, customer participation and connection. At one end of the participation dimension is passive customer participation, where the customer has no influence on the event performance. On the other side, customers may actively take part in the creation of memorable experiences. The connection dimension describes the customers' relationship to the actual performance which aims at creating experience, depicting absorption at one end, and immersion at the other. Consumers are absorbing an event by experiencing it in some distance. In contrast, they are immersed in the performance when they are actually taking part of it and thus experiencing 'sights, sounds, and smells that surround them' (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 102). Hence, this implicates the existence of four broad categories along the spectra of these two dimensions: Entertainment, educational, escapist, and esthetic (see model 'the four realms of experiences'; Pine II & Gilmore, 1998). The richest experience includes all aspects of all realms and lie at the center of the framework, in the so-called 'sweet spot' (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 102). The figure shown below illustrates the framework for a better understanding.

Figure 1: The Four Realms of Experiences; adapted from Pine II and Gilmore, 1998, p.102
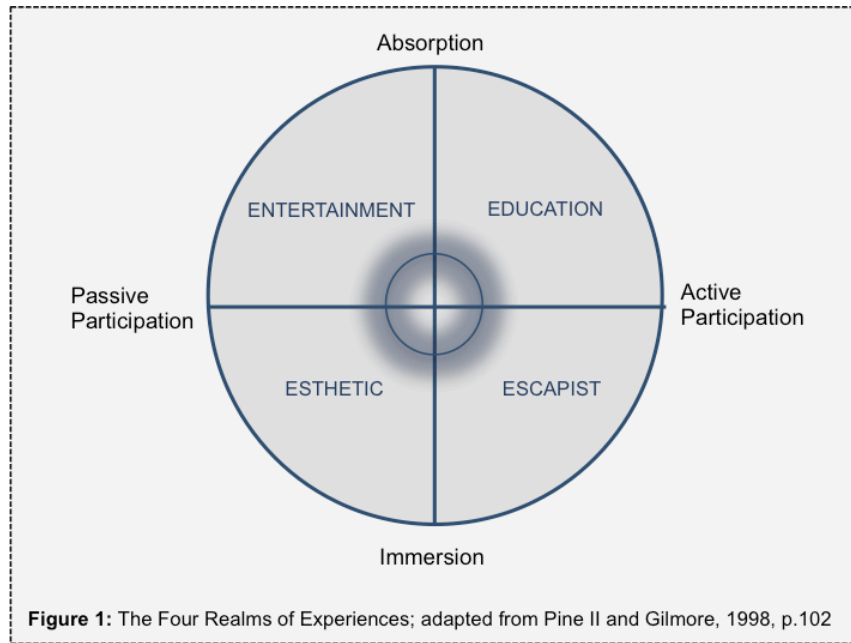
When looking closer at the types of experiences, we discover the following: Experiences in the 'entertainment' category are those in which customers do not participate actively and the relationship is rather one of absorption. Illustrating examples are watching television or attending a concert. Attending a class would be an 'educational' experience and is marked by active participation and absorption, as people are not as immersed in the process. Experiences involving both active participation and immersion are 'escapist' experiences. For instance, playing in an orchestra requires active participation and complete immersion in the event. Lastly, 'esthetic' experiences occur when consumers do not directly but rather passively participate and are still immersed in an event. This type of experience can be provided to consumers when visiting an art gallery, for example (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998).

With reference to the general characterization of experiences shown above, we can state that this first categorization (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998) regards the term 'experience' as a noun. In contrast to our perspective, which adopts the 'verb'-view of experiences and focuses on the internal and behavioral subjective process of experiencing, these categorizations are concerned with explaining what kind of experiences consumers can have. Nevertheless, the suggested dimensions on which the four types are based clearly take up a consumer-centric view. The dimensions of 'absorption/immersion' and 'active/passive participation' relate to the consumers' state of mind during the experience process. Besides, it is noteworthy to mention that the

'active/passive participation' spectrum already emphasizes the interactive nature of experiences, which has been shown to be highly relevant, especially in the online environment.

Starting from this experiential view, today's prominent experiential marketing approach has evolved, which incorporates the focus on consumer experiences, and provides a framework for managing and creating experiences through interaction with the customers. Accordingly, experiential marketing is defined as 'the process of identifying and satisfying customer needs and aspirations profitably, engaging them through two-way communications that bring brand personalities to life and add value to the target audience' (Smilansky, 2009, p. 5). Considering our research question, it is good to bear this definition in mind as it mirrors our research purpose of revealing customers' experiences with online-only brands. Indeed, experiential marketing aims to deepen the knowledge of which in-depth, intangible and interactive experiences are facilitating consumers' overall decision process (Atwal & Williams, 2009) and to establish an emotional connection, that create long-lasting impressions in consumers' minds by touching them beyond rational thinking (Smilansky, 2009). Hence, our study is inspired by this experiential marketing approach that puts experiences at its core in order to amplify its effectiveness.

All in all, we have noted that the first recognition of experiences in academic research happened more than two decades ago with the influencing work by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), and the subsequent contribution of 'Welcome to the Experience Economy' by Pine II and Gilmore (1998). However, the first categorization of experiences provided (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998) adopted the earlier-explained 'noun-view' and lack the explanation of importance of brands during the actual consumption experiences (Schmitt, Brakus & Zarantonello, 2015b). As we are focusing on experiences with online-only brands, we need to take the next step and further explore the concept of 'experience' in a brand-related context: The concept of brand experience, which actually evolved out of the experiential consumption view previously described.

2.6. DEFINING BRAND EXPERIENCE

To date, brand experience is still ill-defined in literature (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014; Khan & Rahman, 2015) similar to the unclear state of definition of 'experience' in general. Nevertheless, in order to facilitate the understanding of brand experience as such, it is essential to retrieve

existing definitions of brand experience in literature, which are summarized in a chronological order below:

Table 2: Offline Brand Definitions	
Author	**Definition**
Ambler et al., 2002, p. 15	'Brand Experience is the extent to which customers use the brand; talk to others about the brand; seek out brand information, promotions, and events; and so on'.
Alloza, 2008, p. 373-374	'Brand experience is defined as the perception of the consumers, at every moment of contact they have with the brand, whether it is in the brand images projected in advertising, during the first personal contact, or the level of quality concerning the personal treatment they receive'.
Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2009, p. 53	'Brand experience is subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments'.
Iglesias, Singh & Batista-Foguet, 2011, p. 571	'Brand experience is a takeaway impression (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994) that is formed in the mind of the consumers as a result of the encounter with the holistic offer of a brand (Klaus & Maklan, 2007)'.
Şahin, Zehir and Kitapçı, 2011, p. 1290	'Brand experience is not an emotional relationship concept. Experiences are sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand related stimuli'.

Reviewing these definitions, it can be noted that even in the relatively well-researched traditional brick-and-mortar context 'brand experience' definitions vary remarkably, and no consensus regarding one clear definition has been reached. Nevertheless, we can infer that the role of the consumer is of high importance in all definitions of brand experience, due to its individual perception and subjective experience of the brand. In fact, the common link in all these definitions is the consumers' evoked behaviors, emotions and sensations. Moreover, some definitions focus on the moment of encounter between the consumer and the brand and the resultant impression (Alloza, 2008; Iglesias, Singh & Batista-Foguet, 2011), whereas others put the ongoing relationship between the brand and the consumer in the center (Ambler et al., 2002; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Şahin, Zehir & Kitapçı, 2011). What can be noted is that

definitions reveal that experiences are created by internal (i.e. sensations, feelings, cognitions) and external (behaviors) reactions. Moreover, even if not shown in the above-mentioned definitions, it is noteworthy to mention that brand experience might vary in terms of strength and intensity (i.e. strong vs. weak experiences) as well as in terms of longevity (i.e. spontaneous/short-lived vs. deliberated/long-lasting experiences; Qader & Omar, 2013).

As a result of this examination, this thesis will adopt the definition provided by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009), due to the reason that it strongly mirrors the complex experiential relationship between customers and brands. Since this definition emphasizes the verb 'experience' by focusing on internal and behavioral responses during the experience process, it is most suitable for this study, because our research is actually addressing the consumers' process of experiencing. The fact that recent research is primarily relying on this concept's definition further underpins its current nature and validity (Iglesias, Singh & Batista-Foguet, 2011; Ishida & Taylor, 2012; Nysveen, Pedersen & Skard, 2012; Smith, 2013; Hamzah, Syed Alwi & Othman, 2014; Schmitt, Brakus & Zarantonello, 2015a; Schmitt, Brakus & Zarantonello, 2015b).

It is noteworthy to mention that numerous studies have acknowledged and showed the importance of the distinct concept of brand experience in the modern world (e.g. Chang & Chieng, 2006; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Schmitt, 2009; Şahin, Zehir & Kitapçı, 2011; Cleff, Lin & Walter, 2014; Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014; Nysveen & Pedersen, 2004; Gilovich, Kumar & Jampol, 2015; Schmitt, Brakus & Zarantonello, 2015b). Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish the brand experience concept from similar concepts, which are often mixed up while actually having different meanings (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014). To begin with, brand familiarity and brand experience are merely interrelated, but clearly distinguishable: Brand familiarity occurs as a result of brand experience (Ha & Perk, 2005). Contrasting brand experience, brand attitude includes general evaluations and brand involvement is driven by motivation as it 'is based on needs, values, and interests that motivate a consumer toward an object (e.g., a brand)' (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 53). Besides, brand personality is described in terms of mere projections of traits into brands (which is not applicable to brand experience) and brand attachment 'refers to a strong emotional bond (i.e., 'hot affect') between a consumer and a brand' (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 53), whereas brand experience is not necessarily 'an emotional relationship concept' (Şahin, Zehir & Kitapçı, 2011, p. 1290). However, as emotions are internal reactions to external experience stimulations, brand

experience can indeed lead to the establishment of emotional bonds over time (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). Additionally, brand experience positively impacts brand satisfaction, brand loyalty and brand trust (Ha & Perks, 2005; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Şahin, Zehir & Kitapçı, 2011).

Furthermore, brand experience is closely connected to the customer experience concept, which is defined as 'the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company' (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). However, there seems to be no consensus whether customer experience and brand experience can be used interchangeably (Ishida & Taylor, 2012; Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014). In our view, both definitions of customer experience and brand experience, seem to have distinct focuses and are not the same. In contrast to the customer experience concept, which sees the entire company as the experience provider, the definition of brand experience is clearly more focusing on the brand itself as the experience provider, which is also the focus of this thesis.

Following argumentation shown above, in order to explain the adopted definition in more detail, we should recall it: Brand experience are 'subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments' (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 53). Brand experiences occur when consumers gather information about a brand, purchase it and/or consume it, basically any form of indirect and direct interactions (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). 'Brand-related stimuli' are brands' 'names and slogans; the visual identity in colors and shapes; mascots and brand characters; and other verbal, visual and otherwise sensory stimuli' (Schmitt, Brakus & Zarantonello, 2015b, p. 3) and constitute the major part of the brand experience. This definition further implies that a brand does not only function as an identifier (i.e. image/memory in people's mind related to a message and name), but actually has to provide experiences (Schmitt, Brakus & Zarantonello, 2015b). As it has been illustrated, this definition is a good starting point for this thesis as it already gives us a first insight into some components of offline brand experience. However, in order to be able to investigate online-only brand experience components, we will first look at the components that shape offline brand experience.

2.6.1. Offline Brand Experience Components

Based on the aforementioned first attempts to conceptualize experiences as such (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine II & Gilmore, 1998), Schmitt (1999) and Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) extend this experiential view by adopting the verb-view of experiencing and providing frameworks that conceptualize how consumers actively and individually experience their consumption process, focusing on 'functional domains of the mind and behavior' (Schmitt, 1999, p. 60). In contrast to Schmitt (1999) who relates his framework to consumer experiences in general, ten years later Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) have empirically proven the experience components in a brand-related context for the first time ever. Nevertheless, since the conceptualization of Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) is de facto based on the experience components provided by Schmitt (1999), both frameworks reveal similar components of consumers' experiences and can be considered to serve as the basis for our following elaboration on the offline brand experience components.

The review and integration of both conceptualizations allows us to generally reveal the following five components of offline brand experience: Sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral and relational (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). In contrast to Schmitt (1999) who talks about general providers of experiences, by calling these components 'strategic experiential modules' (or 'SEMs'; 1999, p. 60), Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) introduce their proven components as 'brand experience dimensions' (p. 54).

In the following, each of the offline brand experience components will be described in more detail.

Sensory experiences appeal to the five senses of 'sight, sound, touch, taste and smell' (Schmitt, 1999, p. 61) through which the object is experienced by the consumer. Consumers describe their experience with the brand in terms of their five senses: How they get interested in the brand in a sensory way, how they touch or feel the brand, how the brand appeals to their senses, how the brand smells (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). An exemplary statement by consumers for this experience type could be: 'This brand makes a strong impression on my visual senses' (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 60).

Affective experiences appeal to consumers' sentiments, 'inner feelings and emotions' (Schmitt, 1999, p. 61), including varying feelings from positive moods (e.g. feelings towards a low-involving product/service) to strong emotions (e.g. joy towards a high-involving product/service; Schmitt, 1999,). Consumer's statements in relation to this type are, for instance, 'I do not have strong emotions for this brand' or 'this brand induces feelings and sentiments' (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 60).

Intellectual experiences motivate customers' thinking and appeal to the intellect with the objective of creating cognitive, problem-solving experiences that engage customers creatively' (Schmitt, 1999, p. 61). The intellectual component includes evoked thoughts, especially analytical and imaginative ones. For instance, consumers might state 'I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter this brand' or also 'this brand does not make me think' (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 60).

Behavioral experiences occur when brands stimulate various types of behaviors: Physical as well as bodily actions and behaviors are triggered when consumers use a brand. Exemplary consumer statements are: 'I engage in physical actions and behaviors when I use this brand', 'this brand is not action oriented' (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 60). In addition to Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello's (2009) explanation, Schmitt (1999) describes these experiences to possibly include consumers' changing lifestyles, behaviors and habits or engagement in alternative interactions.

Relational experiences include aspects of all previous components, of sense, feel, think and act, but expand beyond the individual and trigger relationships between the customer and his/her social environment and his/her identification with this specific environment (Schmitt, 1999).

Experiences within all five distinct components of offline brand experience are conveyed to the customer through specific providers: Schmitt (1999) calls them 'experience providers' (or 'ExPros'), which are vehicles such as 'communication, visual and verbal identity and signage, product presence, co-branding, spatial environments, electronic media, and people' (Schmitt, 1999, p. 63). As described previously, Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) call these providers 'brand-related stimuli', which 'are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments (p. 52). Since we argued above for the adoption of the

offline brand experience definition by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009), we similarly adopt the term of 'brand-related stimuli' for the study.

From the listing above, it is interesting to note that Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) only proved that the 'sense', 'feel', 'think' and' act' strategic experiential modules by Schmitt (1999) to be relevant in the experience context of brands, merely renaming them. This implies that the component provided of 'relate' by Schmitt (1999) is surprisingly not supported by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009). Nevertheless, four years after Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello's (2009) categorization of brand experience components, the 'relational' component was adopted again as the fifth component in the context of service brand experience (Nysveen, Pedersen & Skard, 2013). As a consequence, the 'relational' part can still be considered as a distinct component of offline brand experience.

2.7. ONLINE BRAND EXPERIENCE

Similar to the offline context, the crucial goal of online branding is to create positive brand experience that will result in a strong relationship between a brand and its consumers (Ha & Perks, 2005). Indeed, the need for creating and managing brand experience online is more than clear due to the online brands' lack of multi-sensory material, and the fact that the users can easily switch to competitors' sites (Schmitt, 2000). Experience is the only thing a brand provides in the online environment. As a result, the need for offering a holistic brand experience (Schmitt, 1999, 2000; Pine II & Gilmore, 1998) also applies to online-only brands. The fact that in the virtual environment consumer's experience becomes a crucial distinguisher from other brands (Novak, Hoffman & Yung, 2000; Cleff, Lin & Walter; 2014) further supports its relevance. But: What is online-only brand experience? The research question of this thesis aims to explore this aspect of online branding. Nevertheless, getting an overview of existing theory on the nature of online brand experience is pivotal.

Interestingly, not much empirical research on the creation and managing process of online brand experience exists so far. Besides, no clear definition of online brand experience can be stated at that point as no agreement has been reached among practitioners or academics. This is similar to the ill-defined brand experience concept in the offline context.

Former investigations within the online brand experience context have commonly been based on the traditional brick-and-mortar environment (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014) and have been built on the above-mentioned brand experience definitions. Nevertheless, online brand experience is often used interchangeably with such concepts as: 'Web experience'; 'web brand experience'; 'Internet experience' and 'online experience'. We will now look at each of those concepts closer in order to see how closely they can be related to online-only brand experience.

The term 'web experience' is defined as 'a combination of online functionality, information, emotions, cues, stimuli and products/ services, in other words a complex mix of elements going beyond the 4Ps of the traditional marketing mix' (Constantinides, 2004, p. 112). Another definition states that 'web experience is the consumer's total impression about the online company' (Watchfire Whitepaper Series, 2000 in Constantinides, 2004, p. 113). However, the website's technical aspects are put at the center as being the primary point of contact along the consumers' way of 'searching, browsing, finding, selecting, comparing and evaluating information as well as interacting and transacting with the online firm' (Constantinides, 2004, p. 113).

Besides, online brand experience is also often referred to as 'website brand experience'. In this context, website brand experience is defined as 'a consumer's positive navigations (i.e. using web-based communities and participating in events) and perceptions (i.e. the attractiveness of cookies, variety and uniqueness of visual displays and value for money) with a specific website' (Ha & Perks, 2005, p. 440). Contrasting the definition of 'web experience', the definition of 'website brand experience' does include both consumer's perceived brand experience and technical functionalities. Furthermore, other definitions that are related to the online brand experience differ in terms of the nature of the experience as well. The definition of 'Internet experience' includes both the general experience consumers have with the Internet medium, and the individual experience with one particular website (Nysveen & Pedersen, 2004), whereas the definition of 'online experience', focuses on one specific website and its functionalities (Christodoulides et al., 2006). Other definitions highlight the driving factors influencing online brand experience or the nature of online shopping experience (Constantinides, 2004; Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014) rather than explaining the nature of online brand experience alone.

Considering this thesis' focus of exploring the nature of online-only brand experience, the definition of 'website brand experience' is the most suitable to build on as it regards both

individual consumer perception and technical features as important components. Reviewing online branding and offline brand experience theories, these components appear to be highly relevant for online-only brands. However, as the above-revealed definitions focus on consumers' perceptions and reactions to stimuli evoked by the brands as well, it can be stated that they are indeed closely related to the offline brand experience definition stated by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009). Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the terms cannot be used interchangeably with online brand experience (Ishida & Taylor, 2012; Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014).

Some argue that the traditional definition of brand experience provided by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) can still be applied to the online environment (Limba, Kiskis & Jurkute, 2014). However, as disclosed above, this conceptualization of offline brand experience includes only four components of brand experience (sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral) and does not regard 'relational' experiences as a distinct component, which is Schmitt's (1999) notion. Nevertheless, as argued above, we consider all five components to be constituents of offline brand experience, also because the fifth component is considered to be highly relevant in today's digital era of 'sharing economy', social media and digital networks (Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt, Brakus & Zarantonello, 2015b). Since there is no empirical research on a possible online brand experience construct, we do not deem that components of offline brand experience can necessarily and completely adopted to the online environment. We think that the definition and categorization of the offline brand experience does not take in account specific aspects of the online environment. Until today, research has not yet revealed any specific online brand experience components.

2.8. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF ONLINE-ONLY BRAND EXPERIENCE

In accordance with the abductive research approach adopted (explained later in section 3.2), we aim to deepen our understanding based on existing theoretical knowledge in an iterative process between data collection and analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Accordingly, a conceptual framework of online-only brand experience was created that will serve as a research basis for data collection and analysis. Following the argumentation above, offline brand experience components, taken from the conceptualizations by Schmitt (1999) and Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009), serve as point of departure: Sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral and relational experiences have been proven to be components of overall offline

brand experience and are taken as indications of components for the online-only brand experience. Relating to the posed research question, the framework depicts the online-only brand experience process between the Millennials and the online-only brands: The Millennial encounters the online-only brand, which in turn conveys the experience through experience providers, respectively brand-related stimuli (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). This process is determined by specific characteristics of the online environment, online-only brands and the experiencing Millennial.

Hence, the conceptual framework illustrated below will further guide data collection and analysis. It illustrates overall focus of the study: By investigating the brand experience process between Millennials and online-only brands, we aim at specifically identifying online-only brand experience components.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Online-Only Brand Experience
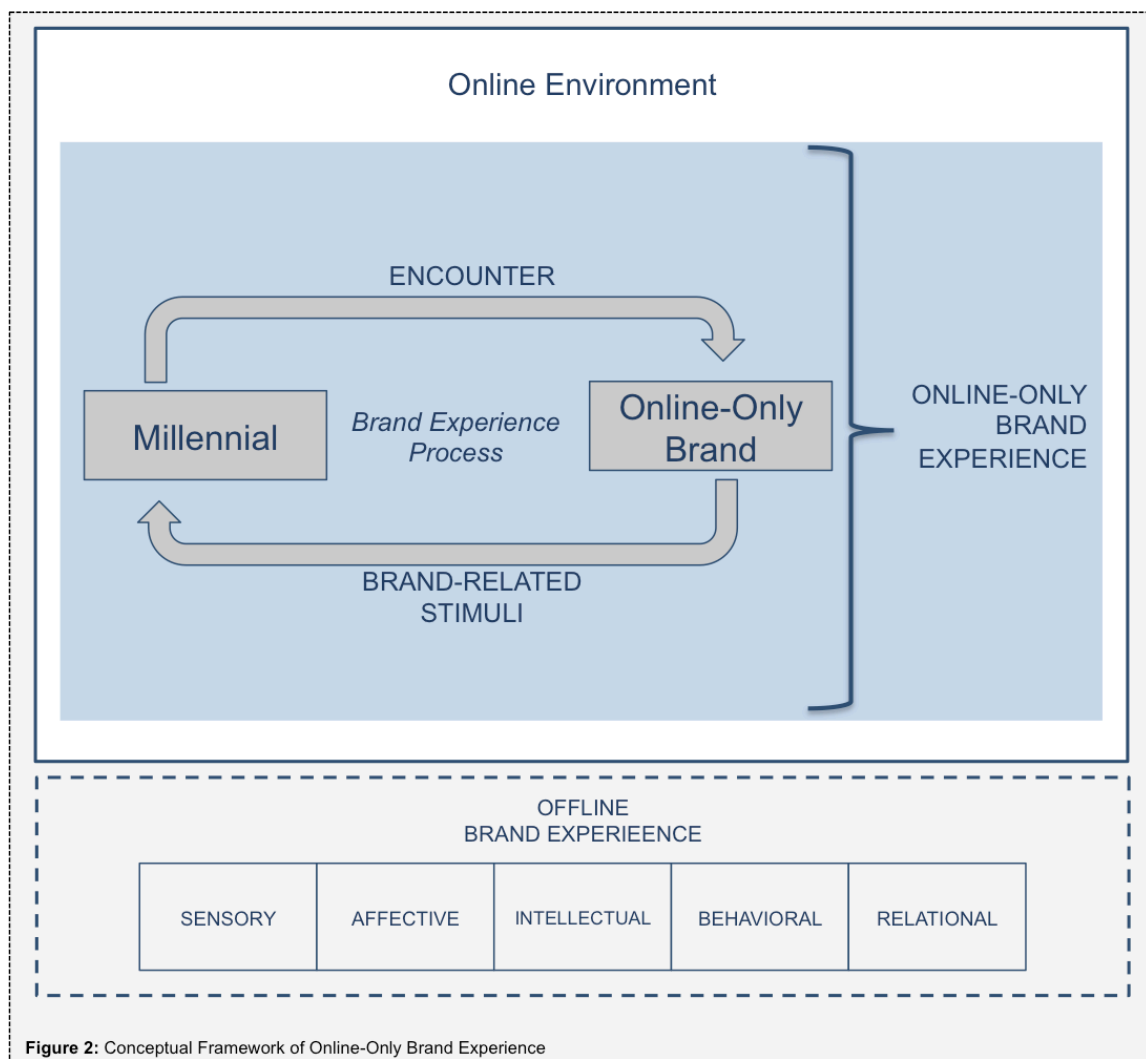
2.9. CONCLUSION OF THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter of the thesis, we have revealed theories and concepts which are relevant to the subject and essential in order to grasp the nature of brand experience, offline and online. It can be concluded that the rise of digital technologies significantly impacted how marketing and branding is performed in today's world - and led to the evolvement of second generation of online brands, brands that are only present online. Hence, compared to the offline environment, a different branding approach is required for online-only brands - since they provide nothing else than experiences. It is, in fact, the concept of brand experience that is considered to be more important than ever before in today's digital era. However, theory only revealed the nature of offline brand experience so far, and has not paid attention to the brand experience within the proliferating online-only brands. By having reviewed existing theoretical views, it can be concluded that brand experience generally consists of five components: Sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral and relational experience, which can be evoked in customers' reactions and behaviors by brand-related stimuli. As this thesis aims to explore the nature of brand experience in the online-only context, we have aimed purely at pulling together researched components of brand experience, without considering influencing factors or possible outcomes. The understanding provided in this chapter builds the basis for the next step of explaining the nature of online-only brand experience. Which components of the online-only brand experience can be identified? Is this concept as multidimensional as the offline brand experience?

3. METHODOLOGY

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In this chapter, we will present our methodical framework. First of all, we will explain how our topic of online-only brand experience influences the choice of ontological and epistemological stand. Further, we will argue for the adopted research strategy and reasoning behind the in-depth pair interviews. Subsequently, we will describe the chosen sampling method and the process of conducting interviews as well as shortly present studied online-only brands. Next, we will show how the results of the empirical data gathered during the interviews were analyzed. Finally, methodological limitations of this research study will be discussed.

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3.1. RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Firstly, we will state our philosophical standpoint as it illustrates our view on the nature of knowledge. Explicitly noting our ontological and epistemological stance is of high importance since this perception of the world determined research strategy, research method and interpretation of the results (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Accordingly, understanding the philosophical standpoint has great potential to increase the overall quality of the research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012).

3.1.1. Ontological Stance of Social Constructivism

In general, ontology deals with the nature of reality and handles the question of how researchers assume the world functions and how reality is understood (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2011). The two stances that ontology can take are objectivism which claims that social phenomena and their meaning exist independently and separately to social actors, and subjectivism (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

In contrast to the objectivist stance, we took on the ontological stance of subjectivism which asserts that 'social phenomena are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors' (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 111). We deemed this approach to be the most appropriate to answer our research question, since our aim was to grasp individual experiences of Millennials (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Effectively, we assumed reality to be subjective and created in people's minds (Flowers, 2009). What is more, since

social phenomena are created through continuous process of social interactions, constantly evolving and 'in a constant state of revision' (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 115), the term 'social constructivism' is often associated with the subjectivist perspective (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

Social constructivism considers reality to be socially constructed, which means that reality is influenced by individual's' knowledge or beliefs (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In line with that, our study assumed brand experience with online-only brands to be a socially constructed phenomenon, which is given meaning by subjective perceptions and actions of different social actors (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Accordingly, to approach our research question of grasping the nature of online-only brand experience, understanding could only be gained through participant's' point of view: We aimed to explore how Millennials perceive and explain their experiences, motivations and actions as well as thoughts and feelings with those brands. This could be achieved by our own interaction with participants over the course of the study, further explained below (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Hence, we acknowledged that no single one reality exists, since the phenomenon studied as well as our knowledge and reality are socially constructed themselves. We recognize that with the present study regarding online-only brand experience, only one particular version of reality can be presented (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012).

3.1.2. Epistemological View of Interpretivism

Epistemology is described as the nature of knowledge, how people perceive information and how acceptable knowledge is gained. Hence, the question of 'whether or not the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures and ethos as the natural sciences' (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 15) lies in the absolute center. Two epistemological stances are generally contrasted: The positivistic stance asserts that credible outcomes can only be reached through observable phenomena, and thereby affirming the aforementioned notion (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In contrast, interpretivism considers social actors to be fundamentally different from objects in natural sciences and aims 'to grasp the subjective meaning of social action' (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 17).

The purpose of this research was to provide understanding about online-only brand experience through the perspective of Millennials as social actors within their socially constructed world. To fulfill this objective, we adopted an interpretivist stance since we believed that deepening the knowledge regarding brand experience with online-only brands can be gained only through interpreting Millennials subjective meanings by exploring their feelings, opinions and attitudes in relation to their experiences with different online-only brands (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). This will further be explained in the research strategy section (section 3.2). This decision aligns our ontological view of a socially constructed world since through interpretivism we wanted 'to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors' (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 116) and interpret different Millennials and their point of views accordingly (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

3.2. RESEARCH STRATEGY

Following the social constructivist and interpretative perspective, we took the decision for the most suitable research approach, subsequently explained. This designated the overall research process and built a general orientation framework for the subsequent data collection and data analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.2.1. Qualitative Research Strategy

The purpose of this research study was to explore the phenomenon of brand experience and consequently to deepen the knowledge in this field. We aimed at examining this phenomenon with the online-only brands, since no existing theories has done so to date. For this reason, we adopted a qualitative research strategy as this approach allowed us to deepen our understanding thereof and grasp this specific phenomenon (Alvesson, 2003). This is contrasting the quantitative research approach where measuring and testing existing theories is the overall goal (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012).

Following our social-constructivist stance, we deemed that a qualitative strategy helped us to get an in-depth understanding of online-only brand experience: We were able to analyze this phenomenon through the eyes of the Millennials, by gathering empirical data of spoken words. Accordingly, we believe that experiences could be best expressed with spoken words through statements and opinions emerging from direct interaction and communication with the Millennials we studied (Bryman & Bell, 2011). By doing so, understanding the Millennials' point

of view and grasping the underlying meaning of their verbal communication relating to those experiences lied in the center of our study (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Besides, adopting a qualitative method and its free structured approach enabled us to respond to the interviewees' reactions and to talk about what we thought is important and relevant for our study (Alvesson, 2003). As a result, the study was geared towards the possibility of continuously undergoing a process of adaptation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Moreover, this approach suited our study best as we aimed to collect a small amount of rich data - in form of few, but in-depth explorations (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.2.2. Exploratory and Abductive Approach

Within this thesis, we strived for the exploration of the phenomena of brand experience in a totally new environment - with online-only brands. Considering theoretical background shown in Chapter 2, we were indeed dealing with a phenomenon that is unexplored in this context (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Hence, throughout this interpretivist research study, a phenomenological standpoint was adopted, where the focus lied on understanding how experiences can create different meanings (Merriam, 2002; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012) and on the 'question of how individuals make sense of the world' (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 18). In accordance with this view, an exploratory study was conducted, as it helped us to find out 'what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light' (Robson, 2002, p. 59 in Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 139).

Even though qualitative research is mainly related to an inductive approach, no clear distinction between induction and deduction was appropriate for this study since findings that emerged from empirical study might be theoretically relevant, but also theory-driven (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Hence, an abductive research approach has been implemented in order to answer the research question and investigate the phenomenon of brand experience with online-only brands. This approach allowed us to generate theory through data collection and analysis, but without rejecting existing theoretical knowledge (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Accordingly, based on the conducted literature review, we constructed a reasonable theoretical framework of online-only brand experience, which was used to guide the subsequent research process. Initially, we combined the existing knowledge in the offline brand experience field, information on Millennial generation and online environment, and used that as the basis for deepen our

knowledge of brand experience with online-only brands (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). During the data analysis process, we then interpreted empirically gathered data in connection with the already existing theory on the nature of offline brand experience, more precisely by adapting the existing theory about offline brand experience components and examining their relevance for online-only brands. This abductive approach allowed us to explore the phenomenon of brand experience with online-only brands in systematic way, and resulted in the iterative process of aligning gathered information with existing theoretical knowledge (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), resulting in a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011). A more detailed description of the data analysis process will be provided in section 3.4.

3.3. RESEARCH METHOD

Based on the aforementioned research strategy, we decided for a specific data collection method, namely semi-structured, in-depth friendship interviews. By doing so, we bore in mind that the choice of a research method has to be coherent with the embraced research strategy, purpose of the research and the research question (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

3.3.1. Sampling Method and Participation Selection

In order to answer the research question, we used elements of both purposive and convenience sampling methods, for the reasons described below. This decision aligns with the general suggestion of using non-probability sampling in group interviews and its advantage of sampling with a specific purpose (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Due to the study's exploratory nature, time and resources constraints (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012), we considered the non-probability method of convenience sampling to be appropriate to select study's participants. Hence, the sampling process started from our own social network, mainly from students at Lund University. The purposive sampling method was additionally deployed due to the fact that this sampling method allowed us to choose participants in a strategic way, ensuring that participants who were sampled would be the most useful to answer the research question (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This sampling method was absolutely essential as the main tool of participant selection: Millennials could only take part in the study if they had lived online-only brand experience themselves (Goulding, 2005). Additionally, we did not want to sample on a random basis, but rather tried to have a good deal of variety in our participant range showing different characteristics. Besides,

our research focus lied on the highly globalized Millennial generation and participants taking part in our interviews had to possess particular characteristics, that ensured their affiliation to this generation. For instance, they had to be travelling a lot, living abroad at some point in their live, possess multiple hobbies and having university education. Additionally, this sampling method allowed us to ensure that broad range of online-only bands would be chosen.

Sampling criteria for the candidates were: Born between 1980 and 2000, university education, have lived or live abroad, are travelling, use digital technologies in their daily life and have wide variety of interests and hobbies. Since the focus laid on the homogeneity of Millennials, gender was not a sample criterion. Since the interviews were conducted in Lund, Sweden, all participants were either international students who moved to Sweden for at least one year of studies, or Swedish students who had been living and studying abroad. Overall, the participants selected represented eight countries. A detailed list with participant descriptions that show their fit for the study is provided in Appendix II.

3.3.2. In-Depth Friendship Interviews

Data was collected through friendship interviews since 'the interview is perhaps the most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person's experience' (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989, p. 138). Considering the research question raised, our main goal was effectively to grasp the respondents' perceptions of brand experience by gathering empirical data of spoken language. This could be achieved by directly communicating and discussing with them in interviews. Indeed, not only gaining knowledge from the participants' perspective is considered to be the key idea of qualitative interviews, but also exploring the reasons behind it (King, 2004 in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Qualitative interviews are further used when the overall research purpose lies in gaining an insight in the interviewee's view (Bryman & Bell, 2011), which was clearly the case of this research study.

Accordingly, following the study's exploratory approach and our philosophy stance (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009), in-depth interviews were most suitable for this interpretivist and phenomenological study as they allowed us to tap profoundly into the subject of brand experience, to deepen our knowledge thereof as well as to describe rich and comprehensive explanations based on individual experiences (Burgess, 1982 in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe &

Jackson, 2012). We could discover subjective perceptions, views and opinions of the participants (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012) which allowed us to dig into the subject of online-only brand experience and deepen our understanding thereof. Subsequently, we aimed for interpreting data by understanding the meaning the Millennials, who participated in the study, ascribed to it (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009), which were gathered through such in-depth interviews.

Bryman and Bell (2011) support this view by arguing that the 'social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied' (p. 402). For this reason, face-to-face interviews were conducted as they allowed gaining the perspective of the participants and how they perceive brand experience in their social world. Two statements by Lofland and Lofland (1995, p. 16 in Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 402) support this argumentation: 'Face-to-face interaction is the fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being' and 'you must participate in the mind of another human being to acquire social knowledge'.

We conducted our face-to-face interviews as friendship pair interviews. That means that we have simultaneously interviewed two people which were close in real-life and lived a strong friendship. Such group interviews with only two participants were most suitable due to the subject's complexity as well as due to the specific characteristics the Millennial generation possesses: While Millennials are found to be self-expressive and independent on one hand, they also favor working in groups and have strong capacity to collaborate (Gursoy, Maier & Chi, 2008). Millennials also love to be surrounded by friends and spend time with other Millennials (Dimitriou & Blum, 2015). These points clearly support the friendship interview methodology chosen.

By implementing friendship pair interviews, we could engage in productive and interactive discussions where participants answered the questions and reacted to the other participant's answers (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). However, one could argue that the discovery of subjective perceptions (as mentioned above) might not be realizable in such pair interviews, because participants might not be prepared to tell everything or just simply agree with the friend's view (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Nevertheless, we think that these intense interaction among friends brought deeper insights and resulted in broader range of opinions facilitating discussion than in single interviews. Indeed, group interviews enabled a broad range of points of views to emerge and participants were allowed to challenge the other's view, which

allowed us to explore the phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In contrast, as experiences are so subjective and pure individual's inner responses (Bryman & Bell, 2011), in single interviews participants might tend to have difficulties in answering questions and putting these inner responses into words. Through the interactive character of such friendship pair interviews we lowered the risk of such restraints and facilitated interviewees to be inspired by their friend.

3.3.3. Conducting Friendship Interviews

In order to conduct the friendship group interviews, a semi-structured approach was implemented, in which questions were not asked in a fixed order but could be chosen according to the interviews' developments. The reasons for this laid in the greater flexibility in interviewing as well as the prospect of gathering a rich and detailed amount of answers. This is also in line with the above-mentioned, generally free characteristic of qualitative research. Accordingly, we were able to freely respond to participants' reactions and answers, and could possibly adjust the questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Besides, this semi-structured approach allowed us to summarize the participants' explanations and thus testing our understanding. This was not only done to avoid incomplete interpretation, but also as a tool to explore the responses further (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In the whole process, we aimed to be the moderators of the discussion by encouraging participants to answer to certain questions provided and directing the answers to an insightful discussion (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Due to the chosen data collection method of friendship interviews, we sampled one participant who was then able to choose the person, a friend, she/he would like to discuss one particular brand. Prior to the interviews, the purpose of the research study was not explained to the participants. They were asked to merely choose an online-only brand that both use on a regular basis in their daily life. Since this thesis aims at exploring the components of brand experience for online-only brands, it was important to look for companies that can currently be called online-only brands. No more details about the research question were given in order to avoid biases. Since it turned out that respondents had difficulties to find different examples on their own, we explained the characteristics of online-only brands and provided exemplary listing to facilitate their choice and increased overall credibility (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). As there is no official literature in this regard, even no relevant categorization of these brands, the criteria shown under 2.3.2 (Table 1, page 15) of this thesis were the basis for our exemplary listing of

those brands. We want to highlight that respondents still freely chose the brand which both used on a regularly basis.

At the beginning of the interviews we explained specificity of such semi-structured interviews, in which we served as directing moderators, posing some questions and purely facilitating the conversation, in which participants should discuss among them. Besides, in order to facilitate free and friendly atmosphere we provided participants with drinks and snacks of their choice. Hence, by engaging in a rapport with our participants, a romantic interview style was adopted (Alvesson, 2003).

In accordance with the semi-structured approach, we used an interview guide during all interviews (see Appendix I) that listed key areas and initial questions, which we wanted to be covered. As previously explained, the participants were not aware of the purpose of the study and could not see this interview guide. We categorized the key areas according to the existing components of offline brand experience shown in the conceptual framework and derived initial questions therefrom. In order to possibly discover new components that are relevant for online-only brands, additional, more general questions were asked. By doing so, interviewees were given the possibility to talk about any experiences they could think of relating to the brands and freely interact, and thus not necessarily following the order of the questions. Additionally, general question unrelated to the existing components were asked, in order to foster interviewees to think and uncover their personal attitudes, emotions and opinions towards the usage of the brand in discussion. The questions followed a certain logical order (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009), starting from broad questions to more detailed ones and ending up in summarizing questions, and aimed at discovering the participants' experience in as much detailed as possible. Primarily open questions and probing questions were designed to stimulate participants to give extensive answers, reasonably related to our theoretical framework (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). For the affective component of brand experience, we asked about their feelings and emotions, for instance. Questions were asked to initiate intense discussions among interviewees, ideally with the lowest possible level of interaction from our side. Besides, the critical incident technique was used in which the friends were asked to describe stories or events that they remember the most, either in a positive or negative way (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009). By doing so, we connected the research question with real-life experiences of the participants and aimed to benefit from the participants' actual experiences with the brands.

Based on time constraints, characteristics of qualitative study and the non-probability sampling methods (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009), determined sample size of 18 people that were formed into nine couple friendship interviews. This decision was made taking in consideration the advice by Morse (1994, in Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006) which suggested conducting at least six interviews for phenomenological studies. Keeping in mind the broad scope of online-only brands in a variety of categories we decided to go beyond the required minimum.

The interviewees were asked to choose location and time of the interview in order to facilitate a relaxed interview atmosphere. We wanted the interviewees to feel as comfortable as possible and tried to hinder disturbing factors (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2011). By creating a naturalistic and relaxed setting, we aimed to engage them in a conversational, but intense and interactive conversation (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2014). Some interviews were even conducted at interviewees' homes. All interviews had the duration between 30 to 45 minutes, except one which lasted approximately 1.5 hours. In this extensive interview, participants were just so excited to talk about their favorite brand that the interview turned into an intense and long discussion. We did not interfere by cutting the conversation short as initiating a discussion was the goal and we subsequently could delve much deeper into the subject.

Since we were two interviewers, one took on the role of interviewing, while the second made general notes. Besides, all data gathered was audio recorded as well (Bryman & Bell, 2011). On the one hand, recording the interviews was advantageous because it allowed us to concentrate on the answers, and better react to them. Besides, we were able to gain accurate and unbiased records, which subsequently could be directly quoted in the section showing empirical findings (section 4.1). On the other hand, recording bears the risk of affecting the relationship to our respondents in a negative way as well as intimidating them. In addition, technical problem could have arisen as well (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). However, we deem that the advantages clearly outweigh the risks. It is important to mention that prior oral permission by the participants was always given for the audio-recording as well as for using their profiles for the data analysis and appendix in this thesis.

3.3.4. Studied Online-Only Brands

The following list presents the online-only brands studied and a short description of their service provided.

Table 3: List of Studied Online-Only Brands and their Categories		
BRAND NAME	**Description**	**Category (as shown in section 2.3.2)**
SPOTIFY	Spotify is an audio player application that runs on one's computer and offers its customers a broad range of songs. In order to be able to listen to songs, a customer must download the client application for the computer and connect through his/her Facebook account. Once logged in, customers can search for particular songs, discover new artists and albums through the 'search box', listen to different playlists or also change tracks and shuffle playlists. Spotify offers a broad and highly varied collection (Haupt & Shelley, 2012). 'With Spotify, it's easy to find the right music for every moment – on your phone, your computer, your tablet and more' (Spotify, 2015, n.p.).	Entertainment Brand
STEAM	Steam is a free-of-charge online gaming platform. It is both a digital store that sells online games and also a gaming library that allows users to hold their games. Registered users can access more than 3,500 games, join the gaming community as well as create and share content. Users can access the brand from different devices and operating systems (Valve Corporation, 2015b).	Entertainment Brand
GOOGLE DRIVE	Google Drive is a product brand belonging to Google. It is designed to store and share files like photos and documents in the online environment. One of the Google Drive functions is Google Doc that allows creating and formatting text documents with others in real time. In order to use Google Drive, one must have a Google account, since customers need to be logged into the account to access, share and receive files. The service is free of charge (Google, 2015).	Database Brand
DROPBOX	Dropbox is a database where users can store and share photos, documents, videos and other files. Once logged in, users can access their files from different devices (computer, tablet, mobile phone), which is free of	Database Brand

	charge to a certain storage space limit; users can upgrade storage space for extra costs. Dropbox also offers an app which allows users to directly open documents or automatically upload photos, for instance. 'One place for all your stuff, wherever you are' (Dropbox, n.d., n.p.).	
SKYSCANNER	Skyscanner is a search site where users can search for travel-related offerings on a global scale. Users can create an account, but do not have to do so to use the free-of-charge service. It provides 'instant online comparisons for millions of flights on over a thousand airlines, as well as car hire and hotels' (Skyscanner, 2015, n.p.).	Information Brand
WIKIPEDIA	Wikipedia is 'a free-access, free content Internet encyclopedia, supported and hosted by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation' (Wikipedia, 2015, n.p.). Articles providing relevant information are offered in 285 languages in total and most content can be edited by any registered user having Internet connection (Polk, Johnston & Evers, 2015). It is said to be the most successful free-of-charge online encyclopedia. This user-generated content website offers its customers the opportunity to browse, search and edit entries (Lai & Yang, 2014).	Information Brand
GMAIL	Gmail is a free electronic mail service provider by the mother brand Google. It is accessible from the Web browser as well as Gmail app anywhere in the world, from any device. Gmail allows users to send different types of files, such as letters, messages, photos, videos, for instance (Google, n.d.).	Communication Brand

Reviewing the above-illustrated categorization of online-only brands examined, it becomes clear that online-only brands are built on service offerings. The reason for this lies in the nature of the Internet environment, which is indeed based on information service (Rowley, 2004). Accordingly, since those brands are built and operate purely online they are digital and technical by nature as well. What is more, we can note that social media brands fall under the online-only category as well (as shown in section 2.3.2), as their business model is purely built online. However, due to their mere function of connecting people and facilitating communication among them, we did exclude those types of brands from our research study. Experiences within social media brands are highly dependent on individual people rather than on experiences provided by the brand itself. Besides, it must be noted that due to the brands' broad offerings in general, their belonging to categories sometimes overlapped depending on how those brands are used.

Hence, we categorized online-only brands to specific categories according to participants' purpose for using it.

3.4. DATA ANALYSIS

Following the adopted abductive approach, theory was built through a reciprocal and iterative process between data collection and analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Following our interpretivist view, we analyzed our data by interpreting oral responses of the participants (Gummesson, 2005, p. 311). The developed theoretical framework (see section 2.8) had been constructed based on existing literature, including five essential components of brand experience and served as the starting point for the analysis of brand experience in a new context: With online-only brands. In the analysis, the empirically gathered data has been connected to this theoretical framework, by taking components of offline brand experience as first indications. In order to avoid narrowing down our interpretation of the data, we used this framework only as a point of departure. As a result, this enabled us to adapt the framework to the new online-only brands, thus to modify theoretically given component of brand experience.

For the overall analysis, we adopted a hermeneutic approach, as it allowed us to gain the understanding of Millennial's world and their view of online-only brand experience as well as understand underlying meaning of their statements (Gummesson, 2005). By doing so, we based our analysis on the so-called hermeneutic circle approach, which is the central concept of hermeneutical philosophy (Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994). This decision is also in line with the aforementioned abductive approach and its iterative nature. In fact, the hermeneutic circle process 'is an iterative one in which a 'part' of the qualitative data (or text) is interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the developing sense of the 'whole' (Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994, p. 433).

Hence, in order to develop a holistic understanding of gathered data and to answer our research question, we proceeded in the following way: First, both of us individually read through all nine interview transcriptions to get a first understanding of possible components of online-only brand experiences. Second, we individually interpreted each of them in a first round of open coding (Bryman & Bell, 2011). By doing so, each of us decided on parts of all interviews that were meaningful for our study's purpose, broke them down into units and created first significant codes. Third, we merged identified codes and tried to categorize them into indicated

components of online-only brand experience, in which we took existing components of brand experience as an indication. Fourth, we identified whether new components of experiences appeared. Fifth, this three steps were repeated two more times in order to ensure solid interpretations. This allowed us to determine six categories, respectively six components of online-only brand experience. Subsequently, after having analyzed each interview independently, we analyzed and compared different individual parts of the interviews among themselves as well as in relation other transcripts, which is based on a suggestion of Thompson, Pollio and Locander (1994; see Appendix III for revealed codes). Finally, similarities and differences in interpretations had been revealed and presented as empirical findings.

Moreover, it is noteworthy to mention that data collection and data analysis have been done simultaneously and were strongly interrelated since this allowed us to continuously compare data and the emergent theory as well as to possibly adjust the research process (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To counteract possible biases in interpretation and enhance credibility of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011), we analyzed the interviews individually at the first step and then compared and merged the results.

3.5. METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

However, even the most appropriate and thought-through research design might be prone to significant limitations. In the following, we will highlight and discuss the most essential methodological limitations to our research study.

3.5.1. Criticism of Qualitative Design

In general, criteria of validity, i.e. conclusion's integrity, reliability, i.e. whether results can be repeated, and replication, i.e. objectivity, are the underlying criteria for the evaluation of research studies. However, quality of qualitative research in the view of these evaluative criteria has been heavily contested by researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

First of all, generalization and representativeness in qualitative research, falling under the criterion of validity, can never be fully reached (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, the former limitation can be weakened by the argumentation by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) claiming that generalization is considered to be less important if research is significant for theory. We deem that this is the case for this research study, as the phenomenon of brand

experience within online-only brands was un-researched. Concerning the latter issue of representativeness, our study is indeed limited due to the choice of purposive and convenience sampling. Accordingly, non-probability samples cannot guarantee representativeness for the Millennials population (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Our exploration within this generation enables us to present only a snapshot of the Millennial and the social world in general and to provide first insights in the new and un-researched phenomenon. The study only focuses on the subjective experiences with a broad range of online-only brands by this generation at this specific point in time. Hence, we can only get some insights into the nature of online-only brand experience in general.

Additionally, the study's exploratory and qualitative nature and its object of study of online-only brand experience might raise issues of reliability. Our focus on the volatile and quickly changing online environment as such implicates that study's results cannot be as resistant and duplicable as in quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Furthermore we face the issue of replication, which any qualitative research study is always confronted with as the risk of the biased and subjective interpretation of the gathered data can hardly be eliminated. Our data collection aimed at gathering data in form of words. As a result, providing completely unbiased and objective interpretation is not possible as it will be framed by the influence of personal values of us as researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Even though qualitative research was brought in contempt in past, it gained increasing acceptance over the past two decades Goulding (2005). In this context, Goulding (2005, p. 294) argues that 'it is fair to say that qualitative research is no longer as merely 'speculative', or 'soft', as was generally held to be the case by many in the past', which approves conducting qualitative research Goulding (2005, p. 294).

3.5.2. Criticism of Semi-Structured Pair Interviews

The study's epistemological interpretivist stance in combination with the research method of semi-structured pair interviews gives rise to one of the most critical issues: Subjectivity. In such studies, the analysis and interpretation process will always be biased and subjective to a certain extent. This missing objectivity does not only affect the wording of the questions, but also the subsequent coding process of transcripts (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since we were two

researchers conducting the whole research study, we aimed at gaining more objectivity by cross checking wording and interpretations (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Nevertheless, we could never be sure of the participants' motivation and honesty since it is exceptionally difficult to understand topics from the interviewee's perspective (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). In order to overcome this obstacle of subjectivity, we tried to get as close as possible to the participants establishing a trustful relationship to the participants, which is the aim of romantic interviews. By holding this position, a rapport with our interviewees was the prerequisite for exploring their inner world, i.e. meanings, ideas, feelings, which was the overall purpose of the study (Alvesson, 2003).

Due to time and resource constraints, the research study could only be conducted by the aid of one single research method, which is another limitation. We are keenly aware that a study dealing with social phenomena should have included multiple data collection methods, commonly known as 'triangulation'. By doing so, the study's validity could have been increased as findings could have been cross-checked (Merriam, 2002; Bryman & Bell, 2011). An additional method of data collection could have been to directly ask Millennials to write down their experience, subsequent to the friendship interviews. That could have brought the advantage of getting more elaborated answers by participants and subsequently deeper insights into their experience.

Concerning the data analysis, interpreting qualitatively gathered information is always challenging (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Supporting this view, Glaser (1978, 1992 in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012) claims that interpretation process has to be as detached from presumptions as possible. In our case, by carefully interpreting collected data together in complete concentration, we tried to abandon as many presumptions about the nature of brand experience within online-only brands as possible and let us guide by the research results.

3.6. TRUSTWORTHINESS OF RESULTS

Considering the controversial standpoint of quality evaluation of qualitative research studies (as aforementioned), Bryman and Bell (2011) propose alternative criteria to evaluate a study overall, namely trustworthiness. According to them, trustworthiness is given through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Relating to equivalents in quantitative research, credibility stands for internal validity, transferability for external validity, dependability parallels reliability and confirmability parallels objectivity. Indeed, evaluation criteria of reliability and validity that are applied in quantitative research cannot simply be transferred to qualitative research since these criteria presuppose that there is one single and absolute social reality (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This view aligns our social constructivist and interpretivist research philosophy which assumes that reality is socially constructed and subjective as well as interpreted by social actors (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012).

Addressing the question of how believable the research study is, we aimed at affirming our credibility by providing a comprehensive literature review, including a clear and thought-through interpretation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). By doing so, the reader should be convinced about our extensive knowledge during the overall research process and thus accord us credibility. Moreover, the data collection method as designed in a methodological well-designed way and pair interviews were conducted following general rules, and therefore relating to good practice (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Due to time constraint, the application of mixed methods was not possible, which would have increased transferability. Nevertheless, gathering a large and detailed amount of data, called thick description, enabled us to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon investigated. By doing so, we tried to ensure transferability as this collection of data would serve readers for assessing findings for upcoming situations (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, the reader has been provided with short profile descriptions (Appendix II), short brand descriptions (section 3.3.4) as well as direct quotes from respondents (section 4.1) to facilitate full understanding of the individual experiences.

Additionally, in order to ensure that findings can be accessed throughout the whole research process, we kept audio recordings of all interviews in order to enhance dependability (Bryman &

Bell, 2011). Interview guide has been made available to the reader to better understand conversations from which our interpretations evolved (Appendix I).

Bearing in mind that complete objectivity from a researcher's side is impossible, we tried to reduce subjectivity by being aware of possible biases from influencing personal values or theoretical inclinations (Bryman & Bell, 2011) that might result in misinterpretations (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Confirmability has further been influenced by our presence in interview situations and our role of posing leading questions. To counteract this, we tried to gain a certain control over objectivity since two persons were interviewing as well as analyzing. Indeed, the application of the hermeneutic circle approach during data analysis and thereby the individual interpretation of the data in the first round further improved confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2011) and helped us to maintain a high level of objectivity (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

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This chapter will firstly present empirical findings, which is then followed by a discussion of the data in relation to existing theoretical knowledge on brand experience. Next, overall findings are outlined in an empirical model, showing relevant components of brand experience with online-only brands. Lastly, an empirical model of online-only brand experience, its definition and an illustration of the most influential components in each studied category conclude the chapter.

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4.1. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In the following, we will outline our findings elicited from the methodological approach explained in Chapter 3. A qualitative strategy used in nine in-depth pair interviews conducted provided us with first insights into brand experience in a purely online context. As explained in Chapter 3, our intention was to grasp the Millennials' experience with online-only brands in order to identify components of online-only brand experience. The research question that guides this study is:

How does the Millennial generation experience online-only brands?

In order to answer this question, we adopted an abductive approach during the analysis process (shown in section 3.2.2) through which we interpreted our empirical data in connection with existing conceptualizations of brand experience with offline brands. Hence, components of offline brand experience, which were presented in existing theory under section 2.6, served as first segmentation of brand experience components. These components are sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral and social experience. During the analysis process, a new component was revealed and appeared to be highly relevant for online-only brands, namely technical experiences. Therefore, according to the results, we categorized experience within online-only brands in the following components of: Sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, social and technical. These six components reflect how the presentation of empirical data will be structured in hereafter. Under each component, data gathered about seven online-only brands (Dropbox, Gmail, Google Drive, Skyscanner, Spotify, Steam and Wikipedia; see section 3.3.4 for further details) will be presented.

4.1.1. Sensory Experience

One of the most significant findings within sensory component is that the participants strongly linked design to the functionality and the technical performance of the brand, as opposed to just its visual appearance. In all interviews, the importance of a simple layout became evident, even though in some cases not from direct statements but rather side remarks. The importance of simplicity of functionality in design can be illustrated by the following statements, which were given when participants were asked regarding the web design of the online-only brands: *'It is convenient'* (Lea, Skyscanner); *'What I like is that it is super simple and easy'* (Christina, Gmail); *'It is really for the stupidest person 100% applicable'* (Steffen, Wikipedia); *'It is very user-friendly'* (Janni, Spotify). Participants also agreed on the importance of a design that fits with the purpose of the brand: '*So in general, I think the layout is good. And is more than sufficient for what purpose it is supposed to bring to people'* (Simon, Wikipedia). This became also especially evident with Dropbox and Steam.

Our empirical data revealed that a webpage's visual appearance can evoke strong emotional affection, and is thus playing an important role in the experience of the brand. One quote that illustrates this point is: *'I would say the design has an impact [...] it looks good, I mean if it would look bad, then I probably would not use it'* (Kim, Spotify). Another example that illustrates the influencing role of visual features is: *'Oh, that [the big picture mode] is actually a very cool feature, I really like it. It is obviously very well thought-out [...] I really like it visually [...] visually it is so appealing that I am actually trying to do my best to have a computer that would be constantly connected to a TV, just so I can have this view all the time. It is just very nice'* (Tomasz, Steam). However, in some interviews, participants did not like the design to the same extent: One interviewee liked it, whereas the other did not (Google Drive, Gmail, Wikipedia). For example, one of the interviewees expressed strong disappointment: *'I think they really should work on possibilities for individual design changes, it is really sad they forgot about that completely [...] I think it is nice to have your own [design] and create your colors [...] Why, why Gmail you don't do those things, because I really like those things, me, I see this as a problem'* (Greta, Gmail).

Over the course of the discussions, in order to uncover purely sensory aspects of the design, we often had to explain participants that by design we mean visual appearance of the brand, hence what is visible while they are using it, like colors, for instance. This allowed us to come

across two interesting findings. Firstly, in such brands as Dropbox, Google Drive and Wikipedia, participants valued simple, clear and light colors, saying that this improves readability and allows them to stay on the page longer: *'Very simple colors... isn't it white and blue? I think it is very calming, it doesn't make any noise… it is just in the background [...]'* (Lykke, Dropbox). Secondly, in such brands like Spotify and Steam, participants also claimed to enjoy the design color-wise, even though, in contrast to previously mentioned brands, colors in those brands were described as dark, with high contrasts, even characteristic in case of Spotify, thus further linking it to the brand itself.

Furthermore, participants extensively discussed not only overall simplicity of the layout, but also ascribed high importance to the simplicity in the design's visual appearance: *'Simplicity, lack of vivid backgrounds, for me really improves readability [...] So for me simplicity is a good thing'* (Michail, Steam). Another example that proves this point: *'The most important thing is that you have an overview... and I think if you have too much design and too much going on on the website, you lose yourself on the website... so it is actually really good that it is simple, with simple colors… so it fits together'* (Jasmin, Skyscanner). These statements show the significant role of the self-explanatory, simple design that does not distract from the main purpose of use. It is also noteworthy to mention that not being distracted from the purpose of use was emphasized not only in regards to the main design of the page, but also by not having the distracting advertisements (Dropbox, Spotify, Wikipedia).

A second aspect of the sensory experience that was shown is its auditive aspect, respectively sound. From our empirical data we can conclude that sound is present, but does not play an important role while using any online-only brand. In several occasions interviewees could not recall whether the brands provided any sounds at all; none of the interviewees recalled sounds relating to the brand itself. Furthermore, some interviewees acknowledged that sound is a nice additional feature provided by brand, for example notification sounds (Google Drive, Steam), whereas none of the interviewees assigned high importance to this auditive aspect of the experience. Some of the interviewees even revealed that they did not desire any additional sounds (Gmail, Google Drive, Spotify).

4.1.2. Affective Experiences

When tapping into feelings evoked, we noticed that participants had a hard time to pinpoint their emotions towards the brand itself. Only one participant could immediately state her affection towards the brand, connecting it to its mother brand: *'Love for Google'* (Greta, Gmail). In contrast, others could not directly state their emotions (Spotify, Steam, Wikipedia), or reported not to have any feelings towards the brand itself (Dropbox, Google Drive, Skyscanner), for example: *'For me it is more a routine thing. I have it on my phone, so I check it several times a day. So no feelings, I just assume it will work and I will be able to send and receive emails'* or also *'Of course if I think about it, then I am happy, but I don't feel anything when I am using it, because I am used to using it'* (Lykke, Dropbox).

However, it became evident that even though participants could not always state their affection, feelings of excitement and appreciation were subconsciously expressed several times. Excitement was evoked by the pure existence of the brand and its specific offerings within all studied online-only brands. This was notable when participants were describing convenience brought by those brands and how it made life easier: *'You can be in two places at the same time'* (Sophia, Google Drive). Feelings of appreciation can be illustrated by the following exemplary quotes: *'Sometimes I have realization, like… oh thanks God that there is Dropbox...'* (Stephanie, Dropbox) and *'It would be hard to live without Google Drive'* (Malin, Google Drive). Similarly, interviews dealing with Spotify and Wikipedia, participants' descriptions of their experience revealed deep emotional connection to those brands. For example, enthusiasm and even pride were evoked when participants explained: *'I really look up everything [...] it is my bread and butter'* (Steffen, Wikipedia); *'It is like eating your breakfast…. but that makes you happy'* (Nicky, Wikipedia). Pride also became evident in both Spotify interviews, where participants emphasized brand's Swedish origin and their feeling of relief of listening music in a legal way: *'Feels good that you listen to music in a good way'* (Matthias, Spotify). In addition, all interviewees stressed the feeling that those brands became part of the everyday life; for instance, it was reported: *'For me it is just one of the most normal things to do... day to day... so it is nothing extraordinary... it is just normal [...]'* (Nicky, Wikipedia) and *'It feels like the natural place'* (Simon, Wikipedia).

Moreover, affective experiences were evoked during the actual consumption process of the services provided by the brand. Feelings of happiness and excitement were often evident. This can be illustrated by the following quotes: *'I am happy when I find a really cheap flight... so it is like... wooohh'* (Lea, Skyscanner); *'Well usually happy... music usually makes me happy'* (Kim, Spotify); *'All happy news comes with Gmail'* (Greta, Gmail); *'It makes me feel happy if I find a page that really helps me'* (Klaas, Wikipedia); *'[...] when I see all the games I own I am happy. That, I think, is the feeling I feel the most, sometimes'* (Michail, Steam). It also became evident that feelings that are evoked when consuming the service can vary in the emotional scale, for example form happy to sad. For instance, if the news received by an email are good or bad, if music which one listens to is sad or happy, or if information that one has been searching for is found or not (Gmail, Google Drive, Skyscanner, Spotify, Wikipedia). Besides, feeling of being respected was relevant in the experience with Steam. In some cases, interviewees reported feelings of disappointment when expectations were not met (Gmail, Spotify).

What is more, strong feelings during the brand experience often result not from the primary usage of the brand itself, but rather from additional features it provides. This became evident in interviews regarding Skyscanner, Spotify and Steam. One participant during the interview regarding Steam even stated that additional features provided by the brand were the main reason why he was attracted to the brand, he explained: *'[...] achievements is what drives me to Steam [...] here are some games that I already own [physically], but I bought them on Steam just so I can earn achievements, which is absolutely useless, except from popping in the feeling of excitement when the message pops in [...] it is amazing, it is like joy of opening a Christmas gift [...] and this is a very similar excitement - I got achievement oh my god, amazing'* (Tomasz, Steam).

In addition, experiences relating to nearly all of the brands showed that feeling of trust is important and inherently present with online-only brands. However, participants reported they might feel suspicious, unsafe and faithless as well. This became evident in interviews regarding such brands as Dropbox, Google Drive and Steam. For instance, during the Steam interview, one of the participants suspiciously reported: '*If in 20-30 years when Steam will fall or there will not be Internet or apocalypse, and I would not be able to play those games [...]'* (Tomasz, Steam), explaining that he would feel more save if he would own the games and could store them on his external device. In another example, during the Google Drive interview, participants reported feelings of safety that were facilitated due to the immediate saving function provided by

the brand. On the other hand, participants revealed that they would not save any sensitive personal information, and would rather choose an external device: '*If you can see and feel it, it seems more controllable'* (Malin, Google Drive).

Interestingly, interviewees revealed that even though liking the brand and using the service in their everyday life, they do not feel loyal. It became especially evident in the interview with Gmail, where participants considered this brand to be the best service provider in the market, but would still change to competitors, if the brand would introduce even a minor fee: *'If tomorrow I would have to pay for Gmail 1 euro and Yahoo would be for free, I would move to Yahoo'* (Christina, Gmail). Also in Steam, one participant who previously stated having a highly positive experience, admitted that he is willing to switch competitors if additional features, which he is missing with the brand, would be introduced by them. Similarly, participants did not feel loyal in other interviews regarding Dropbox, Google Drive, Skyscanner or Wikipedia.

4.1.3. Intellectual Experiences

Following the sensory and affective experiences discovered with online-only brands, experiences which could be categorized under the intellectual aspect of brand experience were further revealed. To begin with, regarding the primary usage of the brand itself, all interviews revealed that the participants did not engage in any kind of thinking or creativity. This can be illustrated by the quotes from discussions, where participants directly answered the question if they would have to think when using the brand: '*You don't really need to think much'* (Janni, Spotify)*; 'No, I do not think that I think much around the brand. Especially not when using it'* (Matthias, Spotify); *'[...] not that I would have to have high intellectual capacities to deal with that website'* (Jasmin, Skyscanner); *'It is so simple, like riding the bike'* (Sophia, Google Drive)*.* Additionally, one of the participants emphasized that using the brand became an inevitable part of life nowadays, saying: *'[...] this is how life functions now, we need email in order to communicate'* (Greta, Gmail)*.* In fact, not thinking about the usage of the brand has been highlighted as a good thing: *'I don't have to worry about it, it does what it does, it serves its purpose and that is it. Since I don't have to think much about it, it is good'* (Christina, Gmail)*.* Nevertheless, it became clear that thinking about the usage was required when using the brand for the first time or when new features or changes were introduced (Gmail, Steam).

What surprised us was in the way some of the brands were able to engage participants into thinking about other things in life. For example when using Steam, participants might engage into thinking about how their personal life has changed over the past years: '*I'm usually looking at this more like, looking back, how times used to be [...] we had much more time [...] that kinda opened my eyes... times when we used to have a lot of time to play games and engage in our hobby in an unlimited manner, it is long gone'* (Tomasz, Steam). Furthermore, this participant stated that based on the intellectual engagement with the brand and analyzing own actions he changed his behavior: '*I stopped buying actually on sales, because of the thinking'* (Tomasz, Steam).

What is more, our empirical data disclosed that participants also engaged into intellectual activities when consuming or creating brand-related content. This type of thinking appeared to happen more often. For instance, when using such brands like Gmail or Google Drive, interviewees reported that they might engage in a lot of thinking and have to show creativity while writing a letter or work on documents. One of the interviewees put it into words: *'I would say that usually I'm more focusing, because I use it for more serious stuff [...] it is about what you send to people, not about the email itself'* (Christina, Gmail). Besides, for brands like Skyscanner and Wikipedia, participants revealed that they engage into thinking when consuming the information provided, not only to understand the meaning, but to evaluate its quality, and thus trustworthiness. For example, one participant explained: *[...] you have to evaluate if it is useful or complete nonsense'* (Steffen, Wikipedia).

4.1.4. Behavioral Experiences

Besides the above-mentioned components of experiences, behavioral-related experiences with online-only brands were reported. To begin with, all participants denied the traditional meaning of the word 'behavior' as the involvement of the body during their usage. Interviewees highlighted that nothing more than being able to use a technical device is necessary. For instance, interviewees reported that they merely needed an Internet connection, had to be in an environment in which using the technical device was possible, and had to engage minor hand movements to actually use the device. However, while saying that online-only brands can be used anytime and anywhere once these conditions are fulfilled. Further discussion revealed that for such brands like Dropbox, Gmail and Google Drive participants would desire to be in the particular environment and body state (sitting, preferably by the table) in order to consume or

produce information related to the service provided by the brand. For example one of the participants put it in words: *'I would say that usually I'm more focusing, because I use it for more serious stuff [...] Whenever I am doing, if I have to send an email I will stop for a second and I will focus on what I have to send'* (Christina, Gmail).

Moreover, from our empirical data it became clear that online-only brand experience involves the experience of navigating within the brand itself, namely its pages, which can be seen as behavioral actions initiated by the brand itself. All interviewees concurred on this point. For instance, participants repeatedly mentioned the easy usage of Spotify as a tool, which in turn encouraged them to move around within the site, to discover new albums, find new friends or simply get inspired by music, for instance. All interviewees of Spotify even highlighted the ease of usage of the brand, in terms of easy navigation, as one of the major components of their experience.

Similarly, interviewees describing experiences with Wikipedia highlighted the navigation within the page as a powerful aspect that stimulates positive brand experience. The cross-links offered in each Wikipedia entry were most notable in their stories. These are links that are related to the page entry where one can click and subsequently get redirected. Some participants even stated that these links were one of the most important features within Wikipedia. One statement illustrating that point is: *'It is great that you have these connections all your way throughout Wikipedia, so that you can get from one page to another page very easily'* (Klaas, Wikipedia). Another participant was highly excited about this feature and metaphorically described: '*You click on that, open a new tab, and then I get into this Wikipedia click-orgy'* (Steffen, Wikipedia). These statements illustrate that the brand heavily invites users to switch to other entries inside Wikipedia and to stay with the brand as long as possible.

Besides, during the interviews regarding Spotify and Steam, it became evident that social aspects of participants' experiences also encouraged 'in-site' movements. Participants stressed that the brand motivated them to switch to other people's accounts by offering a following function. *'You can track your best friends'* (Kim, Spotify); '*You can see what other people listen too'* (Matthias, Spotify), these exemplary statements show that the brand actively wants interviewees to go on other profiles and to observe what they are listening to. Besides, the integrated messaging function allowed participants to share their playlists with friends within Spotify. Indeed, interviewees continuously highlighted this offered option since they could stay

within the brand and were not required to switch to other brands, like Facebook, for messaging their friends. Another example of social behavior could be observed in the reported experiences within Steam. Participants described the function provided by the brand itself that allows to join the game in order to watch others playing, or to invite others to watch. Navigation through the pages of such brands as Dropbox, Gmail and Google Drive, however, was mentioned to a lesser extent.

The third form of behavioral experiences are behaviors of participants to switch to competitive or substitution brands, either wanted by the brand or not. On the one hand, participants remarked and welcomed that Wikipedia actively offered them to get redirected to non-brand related sites. For them, the links in the reference lists, where they can look for further information, were of high value: *'A reference where I can really click on'* (Klaas, Wikipedia) and '*[...] it gives you the opportunity to go to sites which might have a deeper explanation of specific things in the text'* (Simon, Wikipedia). On the other hand, in all interviews participants with all brands admitted that they would switch to other brands if their needs were not satisfied or if they desired additional functions. For example, in Steam, participants discussed that they downloaded additional features provided by other brands in order to increase their brand experience within Steam. In Google Drive, participants used Dropbox as a complementary brand, because they found it more comfortable to read and move documents around. In Spotify, participants remarked that they tended to use other brands if they could not find desired music, one of the participants explained: *'I use Soundcloud as well and YouTube sometimes... because they have some songs and some remixes I can't find them on Spotify'* (Kim, Spotify). In Wikipedia, participants might go to other sites in order to check reliability of the information provided, or if the information they were looking for was not found, one participant declared: *'Whenever I don't find anything on Wikipedia or if the entry is bad... I just switch to Google and I make it a more general search [...] you could say that I switch to other platforms if Wikipedia doesn't please my need for information'* (Steffen, Wikipedia). In Skyscanner, participants also might switch to other sites to double-check information provided: *'I am normally double-checking'* (Jasmin, Skyscanner). Lastly, in Gmail, a participant reported that she might visit other web pages to check grammar while creating any letters (Greta, Gmail).

4.1.5. Social Experiences

Regarding social experiences with online-only brands, one of the first things that became noticeable was participants' low level of self-identification, since they reported not associating themselves with the brand. This implies that social environment exerts lower level of influence since social opinion is ignored. In one case, participants even compared it with tangible products by saying: *'With other products you care, I like my mac, rather than another normal laptop, but with Gmail or Yahoo I don't associate any of those brands' (*Christina, Gmail). Furthermore, the interviewee regarding Wikipedia also disclosed low self-association with the brand: *'[...] with Wikipedia, it is not something that says something about your identity or your personality, because it is just a source'* (Klaas, Wikipedia). Another participant's first reaction shows his indifference whether his social connections were using Wikipedia as well: *'I don't care about friends and family'* (Steffen, Wikipedia). Low self-association also became evident during the Spotify interview, when participants highlighted they primarily use the brand for themselves, saying: *'[...] I use Spotify for me [...]'* (Matthias, Spotify).

Nevertheless, even though the just stated examples showed a rather low social influence, participants made remarks that showed their exposure to social influence to some extent. Firstly, during interviews regarding almost all brands, namely Dropbox, Gmail, Google Drive, Skyscanner, Spotify and Wikipedia, participants acknowledged that they started to use these brands due to friends' and peers' recommendations. For instance saying: *'I started using it because everyone used it and said good things about it'* (Malin, Google Drive) and *'I think I was introduced by friends'* (Klaas, Wikipedia). Even though participants regularly used the brands and considered them to be the best in the market, it became clear that they would follow friends' suggestions to try out substitution brands (Dropbox, Skyscanner, Wikipedia). This can be illustrated by exemplary quotes: *'[...] If someone would tell me that something is better, or easier, I would consider it and try it. But at this specific moment, this is the best you can get'* (Klaas, Wikipedia) and *'[...] if the majority of my friends would say, okay, this is a webpage that is as good, I think I would consider, I am not sure if I would change [...]'* (Simon, WIkipedia).

Furthermore, participants in some cases repeatedly used online-only brands in the social context, together with others. For instance, participants mentioned such examples as: When they are actively using Wikipedia for looking up facts during conversation with friends *' [...] talking about something with friends, and then from there just go on to actually look deeper into*

it [...] in general, positive feelings are, when you have an argumentation with friends, and you have a cellphone right by you and you go look it up [...]' (Simon, Wikipedia); or when they are together listening to music using Spotify at parties: *'Because everywhere you go, everybody is using the same thing [...] is always easier when you have the same... and you know how it works'* (Janni, Spotify). Experiences together with others were similarly revealed in such brands like Dropbox and Google Drive, when interviewees reported about working together on the same document. In Steam, for instance, interviewees stated they could play games together.

Moreover, social interaction was further mentioned in connection with the participants' experiences when communicating with others through the brand. For instance, Google Drive's function facilitating social interaction was said to improve understanding of collaborative work. One interviewee explained: *'I really appreciate that you can make comments in the whole document and other person can add to the comments, in the exact spot where the problem or the issue is situated, so I really like that'* (Sophia, Google Drive), where the second interviewee added: *'Yes, it is sort of conversation'* (Malin, Google Drive). What is more, interviewees talking about Steam also mentioned the possibility of communicating via the brand. One participant even declared this social function as one of the most important ones for him, saying: *'And the second [most important function] is just a quick chat [...] and there is a functioning forum on Steam [...] I also use this one quite intensively when I have some problems with games, it also gives some solutions to the problems. This is the third most thing I'm using'* (Michail, Steam). In contrast, these functions were not found important for the second interviewee. Participants also stated they would use the brand only for its primary function, and for social means and communication they would rather prefer specifically dedicated brands, like Facebook or Skype (Dropbox, Gmail, Steam). Likewise, Spotify also provided communication function of sending messages, which was appreciated by interviewees as a nice additional feature to have.

Additionally, social interaction was further explained to include sharing or exchanging functions within online-only brands. This was experienced by participants with Dropbox, Google Drive, Spotify and Steam. Following quotes illustrate that sharing with friends contributes to a positive brand experience: *'I think very interesting right now is that you can share your games with the family members and closest friends'* (Tomasz, Steam); *'When you are going somewhere, or you have a party with your friends, you can make a shared playlist... so you can just send it and everybody can put in whatever they want... which is also nice'* (Kim, Spotify); *'[...] it is fun, a nice extra feature [...] I can send music to other people, but it is not anything which would decide if I*

use the program or not' (Matthias, Spotify); *'I would say then sharing is definitely the most important feature, I would use it even though I couldn't store my personal documents'* (Lykke, Dropbox); *'[...] sharing with friends and family is one of the most important criteria'* (Stephanie, Dropbox).

Furthermore, discussions revealed that the social following function was heavily used by participants when experiencing the brands. In addition to their main offerings, Spotify and Steam offer communities that allow participants to create friend lists and follow others' actions of listening to music and playing games, respectively. Whereas one interviewee perceived this as not more than a nice additional feature provided by the brand, saying: *'The social feed is not the main thing. It is very good'* (Anton, Spotify), others perceived it as a major benefit. Participants' positive experiences using the social following function can be illustrated by the following quotes: *'You can see what other people do.. and you can find others music [...] and you can track your best friends and see, when they listen sad music, you might need to text them and ask if they are alright.... very useful'* (Janni, Spotify); *'I like when others share theirs [playlist], so I can discover new music myself'* (Matthias, Spotify); *'For me seeing a friend playing a game for a long time it is the best recommendation to at least try what they are playing. [...] For me this is the most important social feature'* (Michail, Steam).

4.1.6. New Component Revealed - Technical Experiences

During the course of the interviews we discovered that online-only brand experience is highly influenced by the technical experiences while using the brands. In fact, when participants were asked regarding the most important things while using the brand, in almost all cases (except Dropbox), they named features related to technical experience. Things such as simple usability and easy access from various devices and from everywhere around the world were mentioned the most and often stressed as major and most important brand experience component.

The importance of easy accessibility was highlighted as the most important feature during Skyscanner, Spotify, Steam and Wikipedia interviews: *'I want to do it whenever I want, wherever I want, and as fast as possible and get the best result'* (Jasmin, Skyscanner); *'The access to the library from every place in the world – cloud storage, you don't have to take your disk, you can just log in to any computer whenever and download it'* (Michail, Steam); *'it is easy accessible, you don't have to pay for, you got it on your pocket, on your cellphone, you got Internet*

connection like basically throughout Sweden, or throughout the world, so it is just easy to get access of it' (Simon, Wikipedia). With Spotify and Wikipedia, interviewees further appreciated the possible access from any device.

Equally important, easy usability of the brand was also emphasized as the major part of brand experience with Gmail, Spotify, Steam and Wikipedia. In fact, participants often mentioned that this is the reason for using the brand: '*Because it is so simple'* (Nicky, Wikipedia); *'Yeah, the ease of use is what I like the most, to everything, on whatever device you use'* (Anton, Spotify). In the interview regarding Steam, one participant even compared the brand to the same offering in the offline environment and remarked: *'The fact that it is really easy to get the game on the computer, which is the cloud storage that downloads [...]* (Tomasz, Steam). Moreover, this participant even stated that he purchased additional games, which he already owned in the offline environment, just because it was more convenient and easier to use them through the brand.

It is noteworthy to mention that we never directly asked interviewees questions regarding easy usability or worldwide access to the brand from any device. Those statements naturally appeared during the discussion among participants.

Moreover, in the discussions, it was obvious that the technical feature of customization played an important role during the brand experience process. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned the possibility for customization in two contexts. Firstly, when they were able to customize the page's visual appearance, making it more personalized (Gmail, Google Drive). Secondly, when they received customized suggestions relating to the service the brand provides (Skyscanner, Spotify, Steam, Wikipedia).

Interestingly, in both pair interviews regarding Gmail and Google Drive, participants had contrasting opinions in regards to visual customization. For instance, in Gmail, one of the participants showed high disappointment, when customization of visual appearance was not possible. In contrast, the other participant expressed her lack of interest towards customization, explaining that she never even felt a need to try out this function. Furthermore, both participants agreed that functionality of the page was more important than the visual appearance of the page. Similar discussion appeared during the Google Drive interview, where only one

participant expressed her wish to customize visual appearance of the page, but other could not understand the reasoning behind this wish.

The technical experience of customized suggestions was also highlighted as positive brand experience facilitators during the course of Spotify and Wikipedia interviews: Participants mentioned that they got offered personalized suggestions, but still related to the primary service provided. In both cases, interviewees explained that this was the way they discovered new offerings related to the brand. For instance, in Spotify, playlists, songs or albums are suggested based on their personal taste and allow them to discover new music. In Wikipedia, additional information linked to the Wikipedia entry the interviewee is currently reading is suggested for consideration. However, during the Steam interview, one participant declared that he would not wish to see or receive customized suggestions, but in turn would value sophisticated customization by being able to choose, what kind customized suggestion he does see: *'[...] some elements for me are completely useless [...] So I would like to play a bit and customize the view a of the shop'* (Tomasz, Steam). He also expressed the desire of customization of different friend game groups.

Moreover, it was noted in all interviews that additional technical features, which were not part of the brand's primary offer played a meaningful role in brand experiences within all studied online-only brands. For instance, in the Steam interview, when asked regarding the most liked features, one participant compared Steam to the other brands providing similar services, and named one feature that competitors did not offer, the additional feature of 'timer', he explained: *'[...] the timer is something I enjoy. Because I was thinking what I was missing in other services, and this popped up, I really liked the timer, even though it doesn't seem very useful but I enjoy it'* (Tomasz, Steam). Similarly, during the Skyscanner interview, participants highlighted supplementary features of geographical search where they could look for flight connections on a world map, for instance. Talking about Spotify, interviewees emphasized their appreciation of offered additional features, like playlist sharing, messaging function and social following. While acknowledging that this were not the major reasons to like the brand, they still reported them as 'nice to have' features, hence positive experience providers. In the Gmail interview, participants appreciated that Gmail divided emails by categories that allowed them to block advertisements and spamming. Furthermore, technical experience with Wikipedia is also shaped by additionally offered features in terms of reference list providing links to additional information, the content template, as well as the information box. What is more, even if already mentioned in the

component of behavioral experiences, the cross-links can also be categorized as a technical experience (Wikipedia). Moreover, during the Google Drive interview both participants declared the additional technical feature of simultaneous writing to be the most important one. In fact, it was named as the reason for brand usage and emphasized that there were no other brands providing the same option. It has been illustrated that those additional features play a meaningful role in the overall brand experience.

Besides, it was also noted that participants appreciated when brands introduced improvements over time (Spotify, Steam, Wikipedia). Participants seemed excited when discovering new features that improved the usage of the brand. In the case of Steam, the acknowledgment of this improvement over time even developed such strong feelings like respect, one participant declared: *'[...] the general feeling over time, I am treated here well with respect [...] You usually feel, like... hey, they gave me something new, they gave me something better [...] and they keep improving it - developing the whole platform and making it more and more friendly to users'* (Tomasz, Steam). Connected to this, participants in all interviews reported that it was crucial that all technical features of the brands worked. This can be supported by the following quote: *'When Steam was just starting it had problems with connections, for service like that it was cardinal mistake when you could not download and play a games, it made people furious'* (Michail, Steam).

4.2. DISCUSSION OF EMPIRICAL DATA

In the following, we will critically discuss explored empirical findings, which reveal the nature of online-only brand experience. Our aim is to answer the posed research question: How do Millennials perceive online-only brand experience?

Our empirical research, conducted through pair friendship interviews, provided us with valuable first insights into how Millennials experience online-only brands and allowed us to explore the phenomenon of brand experience in a purely digital environment. In the following, we will discuss the findings presented in section 4.1 by scrutinizing the relevance of existing offline brand experience components within the new environment of online-only brands, based on theoretical review presented in section 2.6. As a result, all existing five components of offline brand experience have been confirmed to be relevant for online-only brands, even though to varying extents, namely sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral and social experiences.

Moreover, one new component could be revealed from our empirical findings: Technical experiences. All components of online-only brand experience will be introduced and discussed in the following.

Reviewing empirical findings shown in section 4.1, it becomes clear that different components of brand experience within studied online-only brands vary in extent of significance according to brands' nature and purpose of the usage. In order to discuss findings, online-only brands studied were classified into categorization (as shown in section 3.3.4). This categorization is shown in the table below:

Table 4: Categorization of Studied Online-Only Brands	
Categorization	**Studied Brands**
Information Brands	Skyscanner, Wikipedia
Database Brands	Dropbox, Google Drive
Entertainment Brands	Spotify, Steam
Communication Brands	Gmail

4.2.1. Sensing Intangibles

Referring to section 2.6 in the brand experience literature review, previous research revealed that customers experience offline brands through the five senses of 'sight, sound, touch, taste and smell' (Schmitt, 1999, p. 61). Customers may get stimulated in a sensory way, by touching and feeling the brand, for instance (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). However, from our empirical findings, we can conclude that brand experience with online-only brands does not include sensory experiences that stimulate touching, tasting or smelling, but only seeing and hearing. This can be explained by the fact that the variety of sensory brand experiences online are limited by one of the Internet's specific characteristic: Its intangible nature and the consequent lack of physical touch points (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). Besides, this finding further supports our own definition of online-only brands shown in section 2.3.2: Touching, tasting or smelling experiences are not relevant for online-only brands since no offline experiences or tangible products are offered. Accordingly, we can confirm that the lack of multi-

sensory material for brands operating online is also prevailing within online-only brands (Schmitt, 2000).

Under section 4.1, empirical data showed that visual experiences with online-only brands are, on the one hand, connected to the *PAGE'S FUNCTIONALITY*. For all categories of online-only brands, the simplicity in *LAYOUT* plays a pivotal role. Different key characteristics are ascribed to experiences within varying categories of brands: Especially for information and communication brands as well as for entertainment brands, a convenient, user-friendly and simple layout facilitates the participants brand usage and is considered to fit the brand's purpose. Besides, professionalism enhancing refinements in the page contribute to participants' experiences with information and communication brands.

On the other hand, visual experiences within online-only brands are marked by *VISUAL FEATURES OF THE DESIGN* itself. In general, the findings reflect that for all categories of brands the overall visual appearance impacts participants' experience: It was shown that strong positive emotions towards a brand can be evoked by a self-explanatory and simple design which is achieved by a non-distracting and clear visual appearance. In this regard, it is important to note that communication, database and information brands are marked by participants' appreciation for an easy readability, which is facilitated by the use of light colors. This can be explained by the fact that such brands require participants to concentrate on the page over a long period and to intellectually consume the service provided. In contrast, the use of vivid colors was highly appreciated in the entertainment brands, since the main goal of those brands is to provide fun and relaxation, thus not requiring participants to maintain long-lasting visual contact.

Concerning auditive experiences with the brands, we can conclude that *SOUNDS* are part of the brand experiences, but play only a minor role in sensory experiences within all categories of online-only brands.

Overall, we revealed that sensory experiences within online-only brands include visual and auditive experiences: Visual experiences are triggered by both the primary usage of the brand and the actual consumption process, whereas auditive ones only during the consumption process of the service provided. Visual appearance is influenced by a page's layout that is linked to its functionality and overall design-related appearance and play a significant role in the

overall sensory experiences within all studied categories of online-only brands. However, our discussion above showed that sensory experiences are stronger within entertainment and communication brands. In contrast, even though auditive experiences are part of online-only brand experience and might facilitate positive emotions, they have no meaningful role in any examined category. Accordingly, the equivalent offline concept with its sensory experiences cannot be completely applied to the online-only brands, since only two senses are apparent.

4.2.2. Affectionately Disloyal

Previous research (explained in section 2.6) demonstrated that affective experiences appeal to the customer's inner feelings, sentiments and emotions and are induced by the experiencing process of offline brands. Schmitt (1999) as well as Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) describe this type of experience in a similar way. Affective experience components are evoked by brands in form of a wide range of different feelings, from positive feelings to strong emotions, for instance. Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) mention, however, that both positive and negative feelings can arise from interactions with brands. Our empirical data revealed that affective experiences can be considered relevant in online-only brand experience as well. Nevertheless, primarily positive feelings triggered by such brands became evident, which is based on the study's methodological implementation of participants' own choice of an online-only brand for the discussion (illustrated in section 3.3). Besides, online-only brands are hardly able to evoke conscious feelings towards the brand itself. The absence of conscious feelings in online-only brand experience can be related to the participants' fundamental characteristics of naturally using online-only brands in their daily life, considering digital brands as second nature (Godwin-Jones, 2005).

Even though conscious feelings can barely be triggered, we can conclude that subconscious *FEELINGS ARE EVOKED BY THE BRANDS THEMSELVES.* All studied categories of online-only brands included excitement regarding the brand's offerings in general. Even though participants have been shown to use digital tools as second nature, (Godwin-Jones, 2005; section 2.2) they, nevertheless, feel grateful for them, due to the fact that they grew up in the time when significant technological developments happened and online-only brands started to emerge (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). This became more evident in brand experiences with information and entertainment brands. Besides, even though all studied categories of online-only brands are generally perceived to be trustworthy, especially in the

entertainment and database brands, the feeling of unsafety was triggered due to brands intangible nature, thus evoking general *FEELINGS TOWARDS THE NATURE OF THE BRAND* (Janssen, 2015).

Our empirical data further revealed that participants, who have positive brand experiences with online-only brands, do not possess strong attachment and *FEELINGS TOWARD THE BRAND*, that would further result in brand loyalty. On the one hand, all participants are loyal to the brand to some extend, because they regularly use it. On the other hand, all interviewees admitted that they would easily switch to competitors. Hence, it was revealed that all online-only categories examined face this challenge of low brand loyalty. This finding contradicts academic theory that states that positive brand experience results in brand loyalty (Ha & Perks, 2005; Smilansky, 2009; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Şahin, Zehir & Kitapçı, 2011). We suggest that with online-only brands, brand loyalty is strongly influenced by factors characterizing the Internet: Brand's intangibility, lack of association, user's easy switch to competitors, 24-hour availability (Siegel, 2004) - which might lead to lower extent of affection towards the brand.

What is more, affective experiences are not only evoked by online-only brands themselves, but *FEELINGS ARE TRIGGERED BY THE ACTUAL CONSUMPTION PROCESS* by the specific services offered. Here, both positive and negative emotions can be invoked by all studied categories of online-only brands, which are not only related to the service provided by the brand, but also to the actual content provided. Besides, during the actual consumption process, online-only brand experience includes emotions triggered by additionally provided functions, which often result in much stronger feelings than the primary usage of online-only brands themselves. This is most evident with information and entertainment brands and is considered to be an essential part in the whole brand experience process. This finding can be explained by the fact that participants consider primary brand offerings to be self-evident, since they use digital technology on a daily basis (Godwin-Jones, 2005).

In conclusion, our empirical findings show that affective experiences are a component of online-only brand experience, but in a more complex way than within offline brand experience. Feelings might arise within all examined categories of online-only brands, either from the affection towards the brand itself and/or from the actual consumption process of the service provided, in which additionally provided functions are most influential. Information and

entertainment brands, however, can be considered to evoke affective experiences to a greater extent than other studied categories, as we have shown in the above discussion.

4.2.3. Digital Philosophers

The theoretical concepts of Schmitt (1999) as well as Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) showed that experiences with offline brands can trigger any form of thinking, especially analytical and imaginative thoughts in the mind of customers. Besides, creativity and problem-solving can also arise from the experiencing process and motivate customers, thus resulting in intellectual experiences (shown in section 2.6).

To begin with, all examined categories of online-only brands did not evoke any intellectual or creative effort from participants when using the brand, during the actual *NAVIGATION WITHIN THE BRAND*. The main reason for this absence of conscious thinking processes lays in the specific characteristic participants possess (shown in section 2.2): Millennials perceive technology and digital tools as self-evident in their daily life (Godwin-Jones, 2005). However, intellectual experiences are triggered during the ordinary usage of online-only brands, which are general thoughts about life, in a more philosophical way. Such experiences might include thoughts about changing life perspectives or might also uncover personal traits, therefore engaging to think about themselves. The trigger for such intellectual experiences can be explained by the fact that scrutinized Millennials have been brought up during the rise of the Internet and indeed heavily influenced by this new online environment (section 2.2; The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014).

Secondly, intellectual experiences are further evoked *FROM THE CONSUMPTION PROCESS OF THE SERVICE PROVIDED*. Compared to the triggered thoughts from the ordinary usage, such 'consumption thoughts' make up the most of the intellectual engagement within online-only brands. Indeed, we can conclude that consumption related to intellectual experiences contribute to the participants' experiences within all scrutinized categories of online-only brands. In this regard it is highly interesting to look at the varying thoughts according to the nature of the brand: Database and communication brands included creativity-related intellectual experiences; Information brands involved participants in intellectual processes of understanding information provided, and also critically evaluating the quality thereof, as well as trustworthiness. In contrast, entertainment brands did not include intellectually demanding experiences. This finding can be

related to the fundamental nature of the categories studied. As shown in Table 1 (page 15; section 2.3.2), database, communication and information brands do inherently require more intellectual effort, whereas entertainment brands do not.

To conclude, we can confirm the component of intellectual experiences within all categories of online-only brands, even though differently triggered. Similar to sensory and affective experiences, intellectual experiences are evoked by the brand itself or the actual consumption process; where more intellectual experiences are triggered during the consumption process rather than the primary usage of the brand. Deriving from the discussion above it can be noted that communication brands can trigger the most intellectual experiences, since such experiences are involved in both ordinary usage and consumption process of service provided. Besides, information brands evoke the strongest intellectual experiences from participants during the consumption process of the service provided, mainly due to their purpose of offering information, which by nature requires participants to process it.

4.2.4. Digital Switchers

Previously described conceptualization by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) showed that offline brands stimulate both body actions as well as physical behaviors. Besides, whereas Schmitt (1999) explains that brand experience is shaped by any physical actions or also lifestyle and habit changes, Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) additionally included individual body behaviors (shown in section 2.6). Under 4.1, empirical findings have revealed that behavioral experiences play a formidable role in online-only brand experience, although not only in the traditional sense, explained in more detail below.

Firstly, we can conclude that actual body behaviors, such as those revealed by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) within offline brands, are not experienced in any type of online-only brand, since such brands can be accessed and used anytime, anywhere. These findings can be related to one of the main characteristics of the online environment, it's intangibility (Siegel, 2004) and the brands' nature of offering services (Rowley, 2004), which fundamentally do not require any body behavior.

Secondly, we can infer that the online-only brands evoke behavioral experiences relating to participants' *NAVIGATION WITHIN THE BRANDS* and take significant role in the overall brand

experience within all different categories of the online-only brands studied. In this regard, it is noteworthy to mention that participants highly appreciate that information brands offer links that facilitate navigation from one page to another. In contrast, such 'in-site' navigation experiences with entertainment brands are enhanced by offering social experiences (explained below), motivating participants to freely move 'in-site' the brand and thus prolong their stay instead of looking for substitution brands. Even though navigational experiences within brands were discovered to be existent in database and communication brands as well, they are experienced to a lesser extent and can be concluded to play a minor role. Again, this can be connected to the fundamental nature of database and communication brands - to offer simple and quick database and communication service in the most straight-forward way, with the fewest clicks.

Thirdly, we can further conclude that the online-only brand experience includes participants' *BEHAVIOR TO VISIT OTHER BRAND'S PAGES*. Only information brands redirects participants to other sites on purpose, when such brands want to offer additional information sources. In contrast, unwanted switches (unwanted from the brand's perspective) to competitive or substitution brands are part of brand experiences within all examined categories of brands. These behavioral experiences mainly emerged out of the participants' unsatisfied needs (entertainment brands), desire for additional features (communication brands, database brands) or want for verification of information provided (information brands). The fact that online-only brands might involuntarily redirect to other brands can be explained by one of the consequences related to the Web 2.0 development: Its interconnectedness and subsequent consumer empowerment (Berthon et al., 2007; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013). Indeed, our findings confirm that sparse theoretical knowledge about brand experience in an online environment (shown in section 2.7) is applicable to online-only brands: Internet brands, and hence online-only brands, are marked by lack of multi-sensory material and high interconnectedness, which subsequently results in the user's ease switch to other brands (Schmitt, 2000).

What is more, bearing in mind Pine II and Gilmore's (1998) early categorization of experiences along the spectra active and passive participation, our empirical data allows to conclude the following: With online-only brands, only active participation experiences are evoked within all categories examined. This can be explained with the fact that the online brand experience is only created through points of interaction between the brand and its users (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2004) and thus requires users' active participation.

All in all, online-only brand experience includes behavioral experiences, but in another sense than the equivalent behavioral component of offline brand experience. Behavioral experiences contribute to the brand experience within all studied online-only brands, and can either take the form of 'in-site' navigation within the brand itself, or the participants' switch to other brands during the actual consumption process. To some extent, all examined categories of the online-only brand experience evoke 'in-site' navigation experiences: Experiences with all categories can result in participants' desire to switch to competitors, whereas information brands additionally trigger participants' switch to other brands on purpose.

4.2.5. Social Connectors

In section 2.6, we have shown that experiences can take on social aspects. Schmitt (1999) stated that this component of experience include aspects of all previously mentioned components, sensory, feel, affective, intellectual and behavioral, to some extent. However, this component does not merely include individual experiences but rather focuses on experiences lived through with the social environment (Schmitt, 1999). Contrasting Schmitt (1999), Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) did not ascribe social experiences to be a distinct component of offline brand experience, but included in the affective experiences. However, from our empirical findings we can conclude that social experiences are a distinct part of the online-only brand experience. Indeed, different forms of social brand experiences could be distinguished, which do not necessarily result in affective experience.

To begin with, based on our study we can conclude that brand experiences within all online-only categories were somehow influenced by the social advices, but to a low extent. One the one hand, participants' initial brand choice and subsequent possible switch to substitution brands are indeed exposed to *SOCIAL INFLUENCES*, since they are heeding social advice. Hence, we can confirm that positive word of mouth can be highly influential in brand experience with online-only brands (Siegel, 2004). On the other hand, experiences within all studied categories of online-only brands resulted in participants' low level of *SELF-IDENTIFICATION* with those brands: Interviewees use these brands mainly for themselves rather than following any social forces that would influence their choice for a specific brand. Indeed, they are indifferent towards which service provider they use, as long as their needs are satisfied. Having in mind the earlier-explained (section 2.1.2) prevailing intangibility of the online environment (Janssen, 2015), this finding is not surprising: Since online-only brands, by their nature, do not provide any physical

touch points, participants are not able to visibly show their brand affinity to their social surrounding, as they would do with brands that are somehow perceptible in the offline world.

Moreover, we can conclude that information, entertainment and database online-only brands involved participants' real-time *EXPERIENCES IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT*: These online-only brands are used together with others in the same physical place, at the same time. Regardless of the service the brands provide, these forms of social experiences were highly appreciated by interviewees. Besides, entertainment and database brands might result in direct social interactions through the brands, while participants and their social contact use the brand simultaneously in the same locality on different devices.

Social interactions were not only shown to be relevant in simultaneous usage by individuals, but can also take up other forms of social experiences within online-only brands. First, we can infer from the findings that participants interact with others through *COMMUNICATION* features within database, communication and entertainment brands. This confirms that social interactivity, which was shown to generally be facilitated by the online environment (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013), is one key trigger in online-only brand experience, and is more significant in entertainment brands than in database and communication brands. However, it has no importance within information brands. The second form of social interaction, which was revealed within all categories studied, are brand experiences evoked by *SHARING AND EXCHANGING* functions. This became mostly evident within entertainment and database brands, and can be explained by these brand's fundamental nature of facilitating sharing and exchanging among their users.

What is more, social experiences were evoked by the *SOCIAL FOLLOWING* function provided by the online-only brands. Such experiences were revealed to be only significant within entertainment online-only brands. However, participants do not have the same opinion about its significance in the overall brand experience, since some highlighted their social following experience, whereas others did not. This finding can be explained with the subjective nature of experiences (Rowley, 2004).

All in all, we can conclude that social experiences play significant role within all studied categories of online-only brands, although in varying forms and extents, and are triggered by the specific online-only brand itself or during the consumption process of the service provided. One

significant finding is that the component of social experiences is the most significant in brand experiences with online-only database brands. In contrast, such experiences are barely relevant in information brands.

4.2.6. 24-Hour Users

Previous conceptualizations of brand experience (section 2.6) include the five components of sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral and social experiences. Nevertheless, over the course of the interviews, empirical findings showed that technical experiences play a major role in the overall brand experience within online-only brands. Since such experiences could not be categorized in any existing component of previous conceptualizations of offline brand experience, it became clear that these experiences build a new component within the online-only brands: Technical experiences. We define this new component as one that includes technically experienced aspects of online-only brands, discussed in detail below.

From our empirical findings, we can infer that all examined categories of online-only brands are perceived to be easy to USE and highly functional. These technical experiences are remarkably relevant in all categories examined and even considered to be the most influential experiences within all studied categories but database brands.

What is more, we can conclude that easy and quick *ACCESSIBILITY* is the most important aspect of technical brand experience within all categories studied. Hence, we can argue that the earlier revealed main characteristics of online marketing of 'time utility' and 'place utility' (Siegel, 2004; section 2.1.2) are highly important for band experience with online-only brands: Participants require the services to be accessible round-the-clock ('time utility') and to be accessible from every place in the world and every device ('place utility'). This second aspect of accessibility is even considered to be most important with communication and entertainment brands. Admittedly, these types of experiences are strongly connected to the fundamental characteristics of online-only brands, their digital and technical nature (Rowley, 2004).

Following these findings, we can also argue that technical online-only brand experience can be created by two forms of customization: Firstly, the offering of *CUSTOMIZATION* of the brand's visual appearance plays a role in all categories, but is especially relevant for communication and database brands; this can be explained by the reason that both categories of brands

require participants to actively work within the brand. Secondly, customization is experienced in the form of *PERSONALIZED SUGGESTIONS* offered that are still connected to the brand's main service and its nature, but not directly requested by participants. We can infer from our empirical findings that this form of customization plays a major role within entertainment and information brands, due to the fact that both categories of brands focus on providing participants with as much of the service as possible. As a result, we can confirm that Internet's characteristics of customizing offerings, the so-called 'form utility' (section 2.1.2; Siegel, 2004), is highly relevant for brand experience with online-only brands Furthermore, one major finding that can be extracted is the fact that *ADDITIONAL TECHNICAL FEATURES*, not in the usual service range, contribute to positive brand experiences in all studied online-only brand categories. In fact, such experiences are categorized under the technical component of experiences since they are only made possible through technology. Admittedly, technical nature of online-only brands (Rowley, 2004) in general can be seen as the obvious reason behind these experiences. Lastly, participants experience all categories of online-only brands studied to work and to be available at all times, thus showing high appreciation for the *BRAND'S RELIABILITY.*

Overall, it has been shown that technical experiences might be evoked by the primary usage of the brand or during the actual consumption process. Indeed, technical experiences take up the most important function in the overall online-only brand experience, within all studied online-only brand categories but database brands. The relevance of this finding is supported by the fact that statements about technical experiences mainly emerged from participants' discussion among participants rather than from consciously asked questions. In this regard, it is pivotal to point out that easy usage and quick accessibility have been shown to be the most influential triggers within technical brand experience of all categories studied. This is one of the most essential findings of this empirical study.
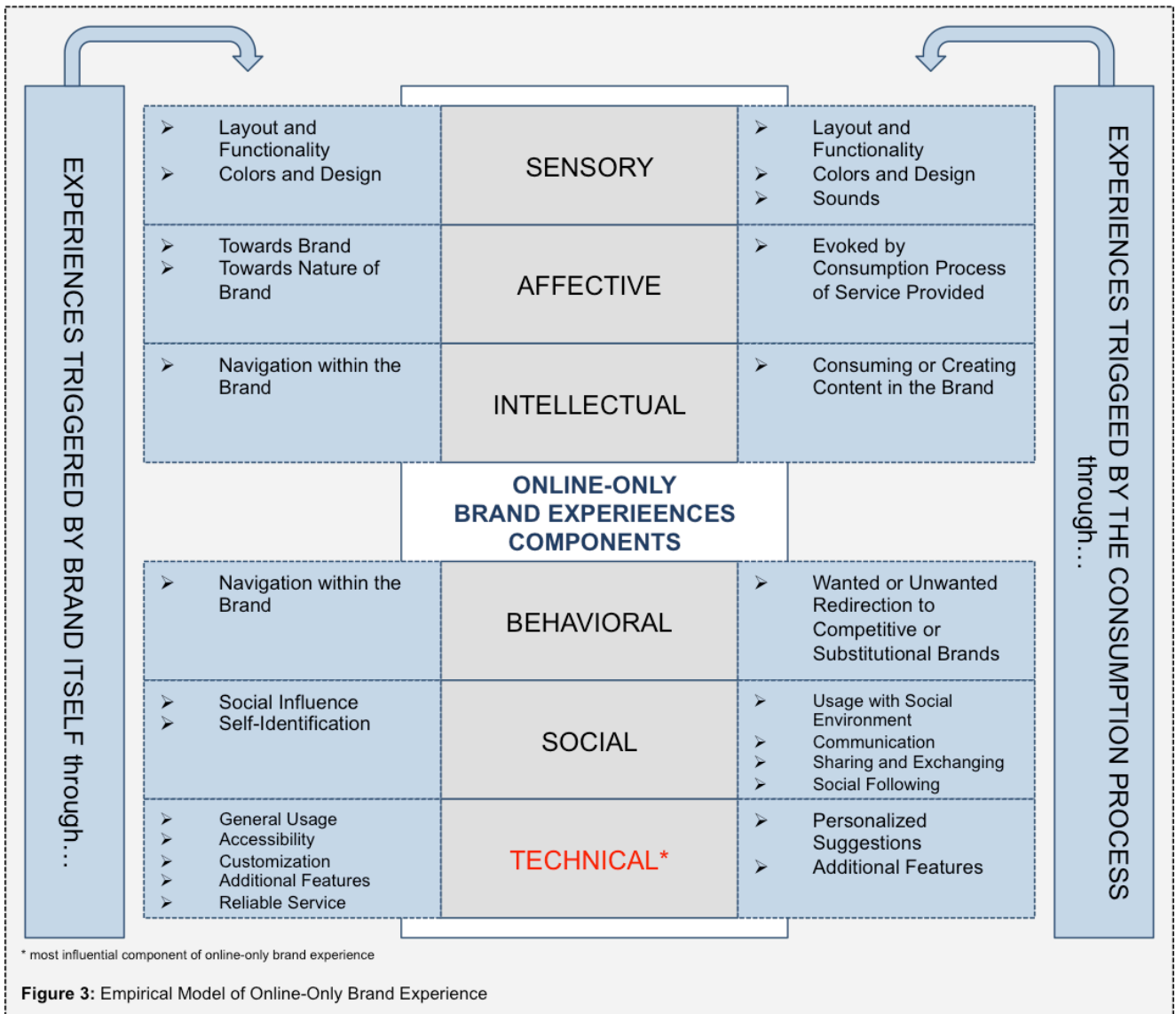
4.3. ONLINE-ONLY BRAND EXPERIENCE

Based on the previously presented discussion, we summarize overall findings in the model below. We have revealed that online-only brand experience is multidimensional, where the six relevant brand experience components cannot be clearly distinguished.

The discussion above has revealed that Millennials' online-only brand experience is multidimensional. The model allows us to suggest how online-only brand experience should be created: The optimal online-only brand experience must include all six components, namely sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, social and technical. The greatest importance when creating online-only brand experience should be placed on triggers related to the technical component. In general, in order to achieve positive online-only brand experience, brands have to provide not only the triggers that are related to the brand itself, but also the triggers that create experience by the actual consumption process of the service provided. These key triggers can be considered to be the equivalents to the revealed brand-related stimuli in the offline environment (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; under section 2.6). The brand-related stimuli in the offline brand experience are brands' 'names and slogans; the visual identity in colors and shapes; mascots and brand characters; and other verbal, visual and otherwise sensory stimuli (Schmitt, Brakus & Zarantonello, 2015b, p. 3).

Besides, in accordance with the earlier provided (section 2.6 and 2.7) definitions of 'offline brand experience' (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 53) and of 'website brand experience (Ha & Perks, 2005, p. 440), this model allows us to derive the following online-only brand experience definition, based on our study:

> Online-only brand experience are user's subjective responses (visual and auditive sensations, feelings, thoughts, navigations, social behaviors and technical functionality perceptions) evoked by triggers that stem from the brand itself and/or from the actual consumption process of the service provided. Online-only brand triggers are website-related specifics, additional features or content-related, for instance.

EXPERIENCES TRIGGERED BY BRAND ITSELF through…

ONLINE-ONLY BRAND EXPERIEENCES COMPONENTS

EXPERIENCES TRIGGEED BY THE CONSUMPTION PROCESS through…

	SENSORY	
➢ Layout and Functionality ➢ Colors and Design		➢ Layout and Functionality ➢ Colors and Design ➢ Sounds

	AFFECTIVE	
➢ Towards Brand ➢ Towards Nature of Brand		➢ Evoked by Consumption Process of Service Provided

	INTELLECTUAL	
➢ Navigation within the Brand		➢ Consuming or Creating Content in the Brand

	BEHAVIORAL	
➢ Navigation within the Brand		➢ Wanted or Unwanted Redirection to Competitive or Substitutional Brands

	SOCIAL	
➢ Social Influence ➢ Self-Identification		➢ Usage with Social Environment ➢ Communication ➢ Sharing and Exchanging ➢ Social Following

	TECHNICAL*	
➢ General Usage ➢ Accessibility ➢ Customization ➢ Additional Features ➢ Reliable Service		➢ Personalized Suggestions ➢ Additional Features

* most influential component of online-only brand experience

Figure 3: Empirical Model of Online-Only Brand Experience

What is more, we can conclude from our empirical findings that the six revealed components of online-only brand experience are relevant across all categories studied, but vary in their importance. The illustration below depicts the following findings: Each category of online-only brands examined is shown together with the experience components assigned which have been revealed to be most triggered by this category. The brands adhering to the entertainment category evoke the most diverse experience. It is important to note that in contrast to the general findings which revealed overall online-only brand experience to be mainly impacted by technical triggers, in the storage brands social experience are found to play the most influential role.

FULL-BLOWN ENTERTAINMENT BRANDS	TECHNO-FEEL INFORMATION BRANDS
➢ Sensory Experiences ➢ Affective Experiences ➢ Behavioral Experiences ➢ Social Experiences ➢ Technical Experiences*	➢ Affective Experiences ➢ Intellectual Experiences ➢ Technical Experiences*
TECHNO-ACT COMMUNICATION BRANDS	INTERACT DATABASE BRANDS
➢ Sensory Experiences ➢ Behavioral Experiences ➢ Technical Experiences*	➢ Behavioral Experiences ➢ Social Experiences* ➢ Technical Experiences

* most influential component within category

Figure 4: Revealed Strongest Experiences within Studied Online-Only Categories

5. Conclusion

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Within the final chapter of this thesis, we will summarize major findings and answer the research question raised. This will be followed by theoretical and managerial implications. Lastly, the research study's limitations will be presented together with suggestions for further research.

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From the empirical findings discussed above, we are able to answer the research question that guided the overall study:

How does the Millennial generation experience online-only brands?

The Millennial generation experiences online-only brands through sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, social and/or technical experience triggers. Among all these, technical experiences were revealed to influence overall brand experience the most. Besides, another key finding within this thesis was that online-only brand experience can be evoked by various triggers within all components that stem from the brand itself and/or from the actual consumption process of the service provided. Thus, these major findings contribute to comprehensively answer the research question posed above. They are summarized in Figure 3 (Chapter 4, page 78).

Besides, we could additionally reveal that online-only brands are experienced by different triggers to varying extents, depending on the category they can be assigned to. Hence, Figure 4 (Chapter 4, page 79) was created to illustrate the most influential components for each examined online-only category. In this aspect, it is interesting to conclude that technical experiences are dominating in entertainment, communication and information brands, whereas database brands evoke social experiences the most.

To conclude, researching brand experience in a purely online environment made us understand that the interplay of sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, social and technical experiences create the overall online-only brand experience. Besides, corresponding triggers that are able to evoke these experience components have been revealed. However, it has to be kept in mind that triggers of online-only brand experience within different categories vary to a noticeable extent.

5.1. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study addresses the need to broaden academic knowledge regarding brand experience with online-only brands. The main academic contribution of this thesis is the online-only brand experience model (Figure 3, page 78) that depicts the brand experience components in a purely online environment: Online-only brand experience was found to include similar experience components as the offline environment, even though taking up different triggers to varying extents. Besides, the new and previously undiscussed brand experience component of technical experience was revealed. Additionally, a definition of online-only brand experience has been provided. Therefore, the research adds to the brand experience theory since it can be considered an extension of the existing conceptualization of Schmitt (1999) as well as Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009; shown in Chapter 2).

The data analysis has answered the posed research question, and findings generally support the theory that brand experience is evoked by brand-related stimuli. Additional contribution is that our study revealed that, contrary to the offline brand experience theory, positive brand experience in online environments does not necessarily result in strong loyalty towards online-only brands, where brands face highly interconnected and intangible business environment.

What is more, this research contributes to the online marketing theory, since the traditional definition of online brands was extended, and a new type of online-only brands has been defined. Added to this, online-only brand categories were created. The study disclosed which brand experience components have the greatest effect on online-only brand experience in particular brand categories. The research, therefore, narrows down the existing theoretical gap between online marketing and brand experience.

5.2. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on our research we are able to present certain managerial implications. The online-only brand experience model (Figure 3, page 78) provides managers with a deeper understanding of online-only brand experience providers. It reveals that managers have to focus on six brand experience components (sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, social, technical) in order to successfully create brand experience within their online-only brands. Generally, it has been made clear that within online-only brands, creating technical experience and facilitating simple and easy usage is crucial. More specifically, the model helps managers to understand which

triggers of each brand experience component are evoked by the brand itself and/or the service consumption process.

Moreover, the study presents a categorization of the online-only brands and the most relevant components therein (Figure 4, page 79). This model supports managers in recognizing which brand experience providers they have to focus on when creating brand experience within their brands. We suggest managers put the highest emphasis on the components that are stronger in that specific brand category. For instance, when creating online-only brand experience with entertainment, information and communication brands, managers should stress technical experience providers, whereas in database brands social experiences should be at the center of the brand experience process.

As mentioned in theory chapter, managers should use brand experience as a tool to facilitate brand differentiation in the highly competitive online environment (Cleff, Lin & Walter, 2014), also to ensure higher business performance that results in greater brand attractiveness, customer satisfaction and happiness (Jevons, Gabbott & de Chernatony, 2000; Gilovich, Kumar & Jampol, 2015). Our study additionally reflected that online-only brand experience might result in those outcomes, even though our study was mostly directed towards identifying online-only specific brand experience components. Therefore, it is highly beneficial for managers to understand what components are shaping brand experience in a purely online environment, which is facilitated by this thesis.

To conclude, from managerial point of view, post-internet branding placed brand managers in the new role of ensuring that a brand delivers its promised experience to the user, rather than purely managing the brand as in the past (Christodoulides, 2009). Seeing the outcomes from our study regarding online-only brand experience, we support both practitioners' and academics' view that in today's age of experience, companies have to focus on experience-driven customer relationships.

5.3. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This thesis provided first insightful knowledge about online-only brand experience. However, the research study poses certain limitations that have to be taken into consideration, in addition to methodological limitations shown in Chapter 3. In the following, these pertaining limitations are disclosed and suggestions for further research derived.

To begin with, the present research is limited by the narrow scope of the Millennial generation representatives. While all participants were carefully chosen by purposive sampling, they all had some common characteristics due to the convenience sampling applied: All Millennials under research were highly globalized, currently living in the same city and highly educated. This might imply that shared factors are influencing them, such as political, social and environmental, for instance. While those limitations ensured a more careful examination of this particular group of Millennials, results cannot be applied to the whole group of highly globalized Millennials. For this reason, we suggest future research taking into the consideration a broader scope of participants that would include the whole group of globalized Millennials. Further research might also investigate whether there is a difference how online-only brands are experienced by globalized and by local Millennials.

Second, the present research is limited by the choice of online-only brands and their categories. Due to the process of allowing participants choose the online-only brand, explained in more detail in Chapter 3, only a snapshot of current online-only brands was taken into consideration. This resulted in a situation where research included only four out of five recognized online-only brand categories. Hence, further research could provide insights of brand experience with other categories of online-only brands, which might include diverse triggers that evoke varying experiences.

Lastly, another important limitation to mention is related to qualitative research itself. This research study aimed at providing deeper knowledge of brand experience with online-only brands through in-depth interviews only. As discussed in Chapter 3, qualitative research might be criticized by its inability of generalization of results. Therefore, further research may use mixed-methods, in which quantitative research might further test the findings of the present research and broaden the scope of this study. Besides, a wider range of respondents, including a broader age group, might ensure more diverse backgrounds of respondents and contribute to

the generalizability of the results. Taking all of the above stated we deem that our study can be seen as the foundation for the future research concerning online-only brand experience.

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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

➢ Welcome participants to the pair interviews and thank them for their help and time

➢ Ask for verbal agreement for using their profiles and statements in the thesis

➢ Ask participants to quickly introduce themselves, including name, age, nationality, studies, hobbies (be sure to recognize their passion for travelling and/or make sure they lived abroad)

➢ Shortly describe what we expect from the interview: Discussion among friends, we will facilitate discussion by providing questions if necessary, explain that it is about their usage of online-only brands in general - but do not mention overall aim of investigating brand experience with those brands

➢ Ask participants about which online-only brand they decided to talk

General questions about their usage:

1. Why do you use this brand? How did you start using the brand?
2. How do you use the website? How often?
3. In your view, what are the competitors of that website ? Why do you use this particular brand, rather than competitors brand that offer similar service?
4. Do you use the premium or free version - i.e. do you pay for the usage? Why/why not?

Questions aiming at revealing SENSORY experiences

5. How do you like the design? Is there some sound that you can hear when you use it?
6. What about other technical features?
7. What is the most important for you?
8. What are the most important/useful features for you, when you use this brand?

Questions aiming at revealing AFFECTIVE experiences

9. Do any feelings, emotions and sentiments come up when you use it? Which?
10. Is it important that you feel this?

Questions aiming at revealing INTELLECTUAL experiences

11. Do you think a lot when you have to use the brand? What do you think about?
12. Is it only related to the brand or also to other brands/things in life?
13. Do you have to be creative? Do you have to be imaginative?
14. What associations come into your mind when you think about the brand?

Questions aiming at revealing BEHAVIORAL experiences

15. Do you behave in a certain way when you use the brand?
16. Does the website engage you switch to other sites/brands when you use it? Do you do that? Why?
17. Is that part of the general usage? If yes, is that important to you?
18. Does this brand satisfy your need, or do you have to check other similar websites? Which ones and why?

Questions aiming at revealing SOCIAL experiences

19. Do you use the brand because others (friends, family) are using it? Can you connect to them through the website somehow? Is that important to you?

Conclusive questions

20. All in all, what do you like the most? - name 3 things - and what would you change?
21. Can you tell us a story with the brand which you remember the most? And also a story when you were frustrated and pissed of at it?
22. Do you have something to add?

APPENDIX II: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

DROPBOX	
LYKKE is 27 years old. She is from Denmark and lives in Copenhagen. She is studying 'Globalization, Brands and Consumption' at a Master level at Lund University. Her hobbies are exercising, cooking and meeting family and friends. She started using Dropbox some years ago during her studies abroad for sharing her pictures with family and friends. Today, she mainly uses the brand for storing documents on a daily basis. She uses the basic version and does not pay for extra storage.	**STEPHANIE**, 31 years old, and is originally from Malaysia. She studies the same program as Lykke. She likes travelling, cooking, eating and watching movies. It was her dad introducing her to the platform, as he wanted to store and share his photographs on it. Storing documents, rather than photographs, is her main purpose for using Dropbox today. Since she is working on her master thesis at the moment, she uses Dropbox every day. She uses the basic version and does not pay for extra storage.
GMAIL	
GRETA is a 25 year-old 'European Business Law' master student at Lund University. She moved from her home country Lithuania to Sweden for two years during her studies. She travels a lot and has been living and traveling in the United States for four month. She has wide variety of interests and hobbies, such as camping, enjoys cinema and theatre, loves listening to the music, does photography, is passionate about fashion, law, design and technological innovations. Greta uses Gmail in every situation of her life, sending and receiving information-emails to and from friends, family or work peers.	**CHRISTINA** is a 22 year-old 'European Business Law' master student at Lund University, originally from Spain. She lived in the Czech Republic for one year, volunteered one months in India, participated in an exchange cultural program in Turkey and Bulgaria. She enjoys outdoor activities, such as hiking and sailing, and also likes dancing and music. Christina started using the brand when she started her studies at University, but also wanted to change her previous email domain to a more professional one. She uses Gmail mainly in a professional context or to communicate with the family.
GOOGLE DRIVE	
SOPHIA is a 24 year-old Economic student from South Sweden, currently studying at Lund University. She has been studying and living in San Sebastian, Spain, for six month. Her hobbies are singing, horseback riding, skiing, spending time with friends and partying. She has been introduced to Google Drive while studying at university and currently uses the brand as a tool for her master thesis. In past, she mainly used it for school purpose where group performance	**MALIN** is a 25 year-old woman from West coast Sweden, currently studying 'Economics' in Lund. She has been living and studying for one exchange semester in Vancouver Canada. Her hobbies are traveling, sports and spending time with friends, like having dinners and parties. She has been introduced to Google Drive while studying at university and currently uses the it as a tool for her master thesis. In past, she mainly used it for school purpose where

was required.	group performance was required.

SKYSCANNER

LEA is 25 years old and originally from Germany. She came to Lund to study the one-year Master program of 'Managing People, Knowledge and Change'. Her hobbies are meeting friends, cooking, fencing and travelling. She uses Skyscanner quite regularly since she has more travel plans lately. It is her first source to look when searching for flights. Even though there is an app, Lea uses the brand mainly on her PC, without logging in.	**JASMIN** is a 24 year-old student in the same program as Lea, 'Managing People, Knowledge and Change'. She comes from Germany and lives in Lund since eight months already. She likes travelling, reading, doing sports and going out with friends. Jasmin has started using Skyscanner intensely during her bachelor studies, as she was travelling a lot during this time. Today, she visits website on a regular basis, in average at least once a month. It is the first source she goes to when searching for flights, but she does not have an account at Skyscanner.

SPOTIFY

Interview 1	
KIM is a 23-year-old architecture student from Malmö, Sweden. During her studies at Lund University, she took the chance to study abroad. She lived in Sydney, Australia, for one entire year. She likes to listen to music and doing sports. She uses Spotify premium version, in average two hours a day, on both laptop and cellphone.	**JANNI** is Kim's older sister, she is 27 years old. She has spent four years in Edinburg, Scotland, for her studies in 'Sports and Exercise Sports'. Originally, she also comes from Malmö, Sweden. Today, she lives in Lund and works in air traffic control. Her main hobby is floor ball. She uses the premium version of Spotify, few hours a week, mainly on her phone.

Interview 2	
MATTHIAS is 24 years old and from Sweden. He is studying 'Urban Planning' at Lund University. He likes movies, hanging out with friends, partying, playing video games and listening to music. Matthias uses Spotify in average every other day, mainly for searching music and having playlists. He uses the premium version on his phone.	**ANTON** is a 22 year-old Swedish student. He is studying Information and 'Communication Technologies' at Lund University and studied abroad for one semester in England. His hobbies include sports, computers and friends. Anton is premium customer as well and mainly uses Spotify to find music and playlists, additionally to exchange music with friends. He uses it as an application on his phone.

STEAM

TOMASZ is a 28 year-old engineer from Poland specializing in optics. He recently moved from Poland to Sweden to study towards his PHD in 'Functional Zoology' at Lund University. He also enjoys traveling a lot during his vacations. His hobbies include playing video games, reading and watching TV series.	**MICHAIL** is a 27 year-old physicist from Poland. He moved to Sweden, Lund, for work, 3 years ago. He has a master degree in Electronics. He enjoys traveling for leisure and for work as well. His hobbies include online video-gaming, fantasy books, taking care of plants and alcohol brewing.

WIKIPEDIA

Interview 1	
NICKI, 25 year-old student from Germany. She is studying 'Middle Eastern Studies' at Lund University at a master's level. She likes hiking, travelling and meeting new people. Nicki uses Wikipedia to get a first idea about a subject. She started using the brand in high school as a dictionary, basically since the technological development of the Internet allowed her to do so. She does not pay for her usage.	**STEFFEN** is 26 year-old and originally from Germany as well. He studies also 'Middle Eastern Studies' in Lund. His hobbies include watching TV shows, travelling and swimming. Steffen uses Wikipedia roughly every single day since he is 15 years old as a free tool. For him, Wikipedia is always the number one for looking up people, things or places.
Interview 2	
KLAAS is a 24 year-old Dutch student living in Lund. He is studying 'Managing People, Knowledge and Change' at Lund University. He likes to ice-skate and to sail. Klaas started using Wikipedia about ten years ago, when he attended secondary school. Since then, he is using the online-encyclopedia to quickly find some facts.	**SIMON,** 23 years old, comes originally from Sweden and is currently also studying 'Managing People, Knowledge and Change' in Lund. Finance is his biggest hobby. He studied in Manchester for 6 months for an exchange semester. Simon uses Wikipedia since he was 15 years old and started using it as a school tool. Today, he mainly uses Wikipedia as a tool to increase his knowledge.

APPENDIX III: Revealed Codes during Data Analysis Process

Clear design is liked	**Sensory Experiences**
Characteristic design	
Visual design is important	
Customization in design	
Design is not important	
Important that design do not distract you from the purpose	
Sound is not important	
Design is convenient	

Feels like natural place	**Affective Experiences**
Routine usage when you get used to it	
Considers it as the best product in the market	
Evokes happy feelings	
Need is satisfied	
Inspirational	
Do not evoke feelings	
Brand love	

Fun	
Feels respected	
Feeling of excitement	
Don't feel obliged	
Feels thankful for co-creation	
Positive feeling	
Country of origin effect evoked good feelings	
Feels happy when consuming info	
Get pissed off by changes	
Get more engaged over time	
Feels safe	
Feels relieved	

Think/evaluate information about information provided	**Intellectual Experiences**
Thinking about life	
Thinking when consuming information	
No creativity	
Aim to gain knowledge	

Thinking about trustworthiness	
Wants to be sure that information is legit	
No imagination	
Does not require to think when using the brand	

Brands actively engage to switch to other sites	**Behavioral Experiences**
No particular body behavior necessary	
Switch to other sites if need is not satisfied	
Changed behavior of thinking	
Engage in navigation within the brand	

Benefits from co-creation	**Social Experiences**
Social influence- would consider to try out something new	
No influence by social environment	
Additional social exchange function	
Social following	
Using in social context	

Chatting	
Customized sharing	
Social interactivity	
Co-creation	
Missing own co-creation	

Using it as a tool	**Technical Experiences**
Easy and quick access	
Easy to understand	
Provides additional offerings	
Likes simplicity of design . allows to fulfill purpose	
Time saving	
Convenience	
Direct access	
Likes easy functionality	
Functional customization is important	
Access your account from others devices	
Access from everywhere	

Offline version offered	
Always works	
Need to be up to date	
Likes customized suggestions	
Easy navigation through the page	
Layout fits the purpose	
Missing some technical features	
User-friendly	