

# Designing for Customer Experiences that Matter

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Customer experience is a multifaceted concept that has been explored by a variety of disciplines and approaches. Becker and Jaakkola (2020) provide a unified view of the fragmented literature, defining customer experience as “a set of spontaneous, nondeliberate responses and reactions of customers to offer related stimuli throughout the customer journey” (p.638). From this perspective, customer experiences vary on a continuum running from a positivist approach—where experiences are described as responses to managerial stimuli optimizing interactions between a company and its customers—to an interpretive approach focusing on consumers’ subjective perceptions of experiences and contextual aspects of consumption processes. Fields such as consumer research, retail, and online marketing have added to the customer experience concept, reaching a consensus on its multidimensional nature and resulting in various syntheses and analyses in the literature (e.g., Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Waqas et al., 2021). A less explored perspective of customer experience incorporates design principles and culture. As this approach is inherently customer-centric, it encourages researchers and practitioners to consider meaningful experiences for customers. Integration of design into customer experience has led to three areas of research (Bonfanti et al., 2021; Tussyadiah, 2014), respectively considering design as a *process*, a *result*, and *mindset*.

In the “design as a process” approach, customer experiences are viewed as responses to ongoing interactions between a company and its customers, orchestrated by the company throughout the customer journey. Although companies do not have direct control over customer experiences per se, as they are inherently perceived by consumers in subjective, independent fashion, they can “design for experiences” by considering the factors that trigger customer responses (Bonfanti et al., 2021, p.2). This refers to the notion of the intended experience, which reflects the provider’s perspective on the customer experience. Unlike the realized experience, which describes the customer’s perspective of the experience, the intended experience has its roots in customer experience management (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009). Although it has been analyzed in marketing literature, this area of research requires more in-depth conceptualization of the processes underlying customer experience design (Youssofi et al., 2024). We also encourage research that explores the comparison between the intended experience and the realized experience as perceived by customers.

The “design as a result” approach refers to the unique proposition that integrates added-value elements which influence customer experience. Past research suggests that design elements act positively upon consumer attitudes and behaviors vis-à-vis products (Bloch, 1995) and digital interfaces (Jongmans et al., 2022). In the digital context, verbal and visual design elements enhance online customer experiences (Bleier et al., 2019) and their influence depends on such contingency factors as timeframe (Jeannot et al., 2022b). Disruptive digital technologies in particular are sources of value to design technology-enhanced experiences, co-created across human-technology interactions (Flavian et al., 2019; Hoyer et al., 2020; Jeannot et al., 2022a). They also enable better adaption to specific needs, especially for customers with disabilities (Dampérat et al., 2022), providing a direct answer to calls for more universality in digital tools (Berners-Lee, 2010), and more inclusiveness and wellbeing in marketing practices in general (Bhagal-Nair et al., 2024). However, digital technologies also create psychological tensions (Quach et al., 2020) and raise privacy concerns (Puntoni et al., 2021), and ethical issues (Belk, 2022). Given the inherent risk that new technologies will only benefit some customers and not others (Libai et al., 2020), we are calling for research that takes a critical look at ways of reimagining customer experiences designed to deliver positive outcomes for all.

The “design as mindset” approach also provides promising perspectives for enriching customer experiences. A design culture values empathy, with an emphasis on understanding customers’ emotional experiences, while encouraging managers to experiment and prototype, accepting failures as learning opportunities (Brown & Katz, 2011). As an example, *design thinking* has already proven its interest in shaping innovative customer experiences (Kolko, 2015). By adopting a “people first” perspective, design thinkers place customer experiences at the heart of the process through personas, user scenarios, and journey maps (Micheli et al., 2019). In its extension, caring design as proposed by Hamington (2019) integrates design thinking and care ethics with a view to creating more responsible customer experiences. *Caring design* sets new standards of moral behavior in businesses with regard to customer experience design. In parallel, a tradition of research on customer engagement in experience creation has developed (Pansari & Kumar, 2017), consisting of a form of *collaborative design* involving people with different points of view. However, engaging customers requires sensitive timing choices in different product cycles in order to achieve mutual benefits for company and customers (Hollebeek et al., 2016). Klein et al. (2003) also indicate that collaborative design has several drawbacks, including poor incorporation of environmental impact, which may mitigate the value resulting from such collaborations. This encourages a better understanding of collaborative design’s dynamics and a renewal of the culture of customer experience design, making it more meaningful, responsible and creative.

This special issue seeks to rethink the customer experience in light of culture and design principles. We are asking for contributions from various research traditions, whether managerial, interpretive, cultural or other. We invite conceptual, methodological, and empirical (qualitative or quantitative) research that provides insights into this special issue’s central theme.

For the full Call for Papers including suggested topics and references, plus detailed information on how to submit, visit:

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