

The brand as a place. For a model interpreting identity in the Digital Age

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What if the brand is a place? In specialist literature, the brand interacts through a series of tangible and intangible touchpoints with its interlocutors. When we buy items, use services, or come into contact with any expression of a brand, we come into contact with its being. Whether these are points of sale, events, websites, packaging and products, touchpoints help the interlocutor enter the world of the brand and experience it. These elements play an essential role in building a long-term engagement with it. However, in an ever-changing environment where brands must be flexible and agile to remain market relevant, they must also be able to adapt their behaviours and modulate their identity and expressions based on conditions and context. It is, therefore, necessary to underline the transition from touchpoints to touchplaces in the system of relations between the brand and the audience. The concept of place, as that of the brand, contemplates spirit, personality, and character. Like each place, each brand has its own particular identity and moral character, making both emotional and relational hubs. An interpretation model will allow highlighting this evolution from touchpoints to touchplaces and how these places of exchange and meeting are key elements in offering relevant experiences to the interlocutors.

Keywords: *identity; touchpoint; place; experience*

1 Introduction

In the broad context of communication design disciplines, talking about identity usually refers to the field of the image. It may refer to the representation of an organisation, a subject (the personality), a belief, or something intangible that marks and allows to identify a subject, making it tangible so that image can coincide with the term identity.

A brand is a semiotic phenomenon (Marrone, 2007). Like a place, it has an identity, a personality, a mental space, a way of being and manifesting itself that allows people to identify and know it. According to Proshansky (1978, p. 155), “identity [...] refers to those dimensions of the Self that define the individual’s identity in relation to the physical environment through a complex system of aware



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and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, and goals coupled with behavioural tendencies and skills relevant to that environment.”

The brand cannot thus be considered only like a signature: its properties imply that, based on one’s awareness, it can become a source of emotion, memories, intentions, as well as a sense of belonging, all of which add to the evolution of people’s characteristics over time.

Because of the type of connection that the individual has with it, this identity, which changes over time, can develop differently simultaneously with its audience (Relph, 1976/2008).

In the last twenty years, the way brands communicate has changed radically. Nowadays, “a brand is no longer simply a nice, clean logo that is attached in the same place every time. A brand is a platform, a brand is flexible, a brand is a place for exchange, it is not fixed, and therefore there is no such thing as a single brand. Methods exist which allow a shape to form, which allow communication and recognisable behaviour, but this is no longer about something inflexible and permanent” (Shaughnessy, 2013, pp. 32-33). The solid technological acceleration that has taken place in recent decades has reconfigured the expectations and needs of consumers, forcing brands to change their behaviours and values. Many customs and applications previously considered the norm today have undergone substantial changes: new markets, the evolution of the consumer figure, and hybridisation between the physical and digital world.

In this context, where change appears to be the only constant, brands need to move towards a model capable of having qualities such as agility, adaptability, multidimensionality, attachment, and coherence. They must be able to modulate their identity and expressions to meet the expectation of individuals to experience a remarkable moment with the brand through interactions and emotions (Barison, 2020).

Henrion and Parkin (1967, p. 7) already defined “corporate image” as “the totality of pictures or ideas or reputations” of a “personality” (single entity or organisation) in the mind of the people who interact with such “personality”. This idea is formed over time through a series of “points of contact”, such as buildings, products, packaging, printing, vehicles, publications, uniforms, promotional activities, etc. In other words, through all that complex of actions, channels, tools, and behaviours that enable users or clients to get in touch with an organisation. Therefore, the brand’s task is to make the products and services it offers unique for the people through the territories of identification and identity (Carmi&Ubertis, 2020).

It is precisely this emotional sphere that makes it possible to approach brands with places: places are emotional spaces, the place “[...] is made in the mind of the people who recognise and name it [...], the place can be remembered and nostalgic for it” (Liotta, 2005, p. 100). The brand is a mental territory, a place of representation (Carmi, 2020; De Martini, pp. 30–31), located in people’s minds. If brands and places could once be designed using very distinct and purchase-oriented methods, this is no longer the case. People today want to live meaningful experiences, to be a part of realities that inspire and innovate, to build relationships, and to identify with their surroundings. We can find all that in the so-called touchplace, an original definition we will introduce and deepen in the following sections. It can be concisely defined as a multidimensional and sociological spatial environment, materially and/or immaterially bounded, in which the interlocutor has a personal and meaningful experience of a brand through communicative acts.

Therefore, instead of a touchpoint, is it possible to introduce the touchplace to define the sphere of moments and communicative acts that allow a brand to get in touch with its audience? So, what if the brand is a place?

2 Uncertainty as the only certainty

Over the centuries, society has been configured as an organism constantly moving, a living being continuously evolving. In this evolutionary perspective, during the first decade of the 2000s, several factors provided the elements to build what Bauman called liquid modernity. He outlined this concept as the most frenetic phase of globalisation in which he argues that “the only constant is change and the only certainty is uncertainty” (Bauman, 2000, p. VII). In post-modernity, change is the only permanent factor in which people, unstoppably searching for novelty, can experience infinite possibilities.

In 2019, the year in which a global pandemic broke out so violent as to lead to a health emergency unprecedented in contemporary history, humanity once again dealt with change, uncertainty and the reorganisation of structures, communication, and services on a large scale. In recent years everything that was considered safe and stable has changed shape: houses have become offices, gyms, beauty centres, and schools; hospitals have changed their internal composition; the race for innovative technologies has accelerated the pace; coexistence has been rethought; the places changed; habits and behaviours have been transformed, and a new sociality has been established among individuals. Therefore, the real and digital dichotomy has been strongly pushed, creating a new synergy between space, people, and machines.

As a result, in a world as stable as it is unstable, subject to constant changes, brands have the arduous task of maintaining a prominent position over time; but what behaviours must they persevere to support this direction?

To hold a strong position in the market, brands must, first of all, be agile. They must learn to deal with the constant change in society, lifestyle and human needs and adapt their attitudes to create new relevant experiences (Walsh, 2018, p. 3). To be successful, brands must “embrace the agility paradox” by finding a balance between the two dimensions of leading and true. So, they must incorporate a visionary attitude capable of creating strong differentiation (leading) and behaving in an authentic way to gain credibility and be useful to the consumer (true) (Landor&Fitch, 2017).

In a scenario where people’s expectations evolve, brands are also called upon to become dialogic actors. Consumers, increasingly attentive, are making decisions towards brands based not only on reviews, sponsors and supporters of the product or price but on the “behavioural” evaluations of the brands and what they do, say and represent. In an increasingly conversational market, the dialogic dimension established between brand and consumer (Levine et al., 2009) thus becomes the cornerstone of the new communication paradigms (Ciancia, 2016, p. 17).

Brands must finally be able to maintain a “clear, coherent and authentic personality” over the years (Olins, 2015, p. 83) to front the fickleness of the future. Brands must continually refine their essence to adapt to market and societal developments. The identity of any brand must therefore be necessarily “modulated and adapted from time to time according to the changing circumstances” (Olins, 1996, p. 67) as “to stay in one’s place, one must know how to change” (Olins, 2015, p. 64).

3 Brand and place: a peculiar similarity

In this scenario of changes involving the idea of place, it is necessary to clarify some definitions to support our thesis. Talking about the place differs substantially from talking about space. The space is a geographical entity, an indeterminate extension conceived from an objective point of view that determines the reference within which the place is located. It can be presented through coordinates (of latitude and longitude) and refers to a mathematical and scientific language. On the other hand, the place is an intrinsic socio-cultural entity characterised by specificities that help define the subject's identity. When we talk about place, we talk about history, culture, values and relationships, subjectivity, and meanings. Tagliapietra (2005) affirms that "space is thought, places are inhabited. Space is traversed, in places one stops."

However, beyond the spatial and value representation that differentiates these two terms, to answer the initial question (is the brand a place?), discussing five characteristics that brand and place have in common is appropriate.

3.1 Tangibility and intangibility

Using Aristotle's words, we can say that place and brand share an essence and a form of existence independent of physical bodies, although they are not themselves bodies. Indeed, they have a dual nature and an intrinsic duality, which can be found in their constitution. Grizzanti (2018, pp. 24–30) states that the brand comprises a tangible dimension, represented by its visibility and concreteness, and an intangible dimension, represented by its character and essence, that embodies a semiotic, social, and cultural dimension. It is the same for a place.

3.2 Emotional spaces

Brand and place are subjective and emotionally lived realities imbued with perceptions and feelings. Here in these realities, the individual's subjectivity prevails over the objectivity of physical data: through one's feeling, the place, just like the brand, acquires greater importance thanks to the suggestions, activities, feelings, and memories it transmits to the individual subject. They are mental territories "of the heart" with which special memories and emotional connections are built.

3.3 Spirit, personality and character

Place and brand contain "a single entity", a spirit and a character of their own (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 5). A place exactly like a brand is "a concrete here, with its particular identity" (Norberg-Schulz, 1979, p. 24). According to Goodwin et al. (2015, pp. 148–168), brands have a moral character of primary importance in consumer brand evaluation (Khamitov & Duclos, 2018, p. 340). Brands, like places, possess a personality, defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347) and a tone of voice with which they interface with the world.

3.4 Relational centre

The place is a symbolic representation of space characterised by three fundamental properties: history, relationship, and identity. In a place the individual can recognise himself and have a common history with other subjects, thus living in a social context or meeting space created through complex relationships. Each place is a unique mixture of the relationships that configure the social space (Massey & Jess, 2006, p. 49). Like the brand, the place is seen as a reality of encounters, the precise connection between activities, relationships, history, and movements. Brands and places are physical

and mental areas in which interactions evolve and take shape; they are thus meeting places formed by a tangle of relationships that meet and intersect.

3.5 Identification and identity

The identity of the place and the brand are defined in correlation with the Self of the human being and can substantially impact the human mind that they become part of how we define ourselves. The decision to live, move to, or return to certain places or brands over others can be influenced by the subject's perception of what that place-brand represents: perhaps a safe zone, a hope, or an opportunity. Often, the concept of place identity, like the concept of brand identification, coincides with a human's natural habit of identifying himself with situations, people, or spaces. "Customers want more than products, more than features, more than benefits, even more than experiences. They want meaning. They want a sense of belonging. They want creative control over their life stories" (Neumeier, 2015, p. 36).

4 From touchpoint to touchplace

Davis and Longoria (2003, p. 1) define touchpoints as "all of the different ways that your brand interacts with and makes an impression on customers, employees and other stakeholders". Touchpoints, in the perception of receivers, function like the "constitutive features of a unitary complex of signs" (Anceschi, 1985, p. 36; Anceschi, 1988, pp. 161–162) outlining the traits of an "artificial person" (e.g., an organisation, a corporation) (Henrion & Parkin, 1967, p. 7). Wheeler (2017, p. 12) states that "the best identity programs embody and advance the company's brand by supporting desired perceptions. Identity expresses itself in every touchpoint of the brand and becomes intrinsic to a company's culture – a constant symbol of its core values and its relevance".

The "corporate personality" (or "artificial person") is a figure (or person) that "consists of objects" (Anceschi, 1985, p. 36; Anceschi, 1988, pp. 161–162), and corporate image is communication through a juxtaposition of objects or rather narration through objects. The corporate image then produces an "image", the portrait of the organisation's artificial person, by controlling individual objects' appearance and behaviours. These objects represent any communicative act present along the interlocutor customer journey and play a fundamental function in building a stable relationship with the brand. According to Minestrone (2011, p. 68), touchpoints are the "bricks" of the customer's experience and can assist her/him in meeting needs while increasing brand equity. These elements also determine the consumer's positive or negative opinions and attitudes (Peñalver, 2020) through their emotional properties. In fact, by designing touchpoints with an emotional component, it will be possible to build an enduring preference and a strong link with the brand.

The customer journey has substantially changed in the past few years due to consumers' changing behaviours and preferences and the touchpoints' use practices. The purchase decision-making process has changed first from linear, as established by the AIDA funnel model, to circular (Court et al., 2009). Then, as highlighted by Rennie et al. (2020), it became more complex due to a network of contacts between brand and consumer that is increasingly personal and differentiated from user to user. Their Messy Middle model also emphasises how in recent years, the audience has begun to exploit cognitive biases to shed light on the infinite series of products and services offered on a large scale. Thus, making the decision-making process of purchase an experience that is no longer point-like but multifaceted.

The evolution of some principles, such as the co-presence and co-essence of the brand between material and immaterial; the switch from the figure of the consumer to that of the interlocutor; the evolution of brands as living organisms (van Nes, 2013); and a new conception of experience has led to the evolution of touchpoints into touchplaces. The pandemic has accelerated some of the trends that had begun to develop in the previous decade, such as the implementation of digitisation, the growing adoption of e-commerce, and the development of virtual applications. As a result, phygital, which refers to the union of the physical and digital realms in a third enhanced configuration, has gained currency. The advent of the phygital has created a bridge between the physical world, which keeps defending the value of its material and tangible roots, and the digital world, destined to gain ground as new technologies emerge. The boundary separating the physical and digital dimensions becomes permeable because of immersiveness, the immediacy of the *hic et nunc* (here and now), and multiple and simultaneous interactions. Thus, allowing those who experience it to move freely from one sphere to another, testing both realities simultaneously.

The consumer figure has also evolved significantly. During the 80s, the target was powerless in the face of direct communication (Fabris & Minestrone, 2010, p. 34). In the decades that followed, instead, consumers searched directly for an offer that met their expectations, demanding more benefits and fewer attributes from brands and their products. Today, this figure has changed yet again. People are searching for a lifestyle, something to identify with, and a feeling of belonging rather than a product or a benefit. These users want to be recognised as active brand members: to have meaningful experiences (Sacchi, 2020), share goals and interests, meet new people, and contribute to creating a narrative (Ciancia, 2016, p. 19). They want to be interlocutors with whom the company communicates.

Talking about experiences, we are not referring to objective and governable situations through empirical measurements. On the contrary, these are subjective phenomena characterised by three fundamental elements: beliefs, emotions, and sensations (Harari, 2017, p. 293). People prefer to buy and experience a story, a value, rather than a simple product, and it is precisely in these notions that the experience economy resides (Dramer & Sunbo, 2008, p. 1). Experiences can involve people intimately by recalling compelling emotions and sensations. An individual becomes the protagonist of a brand-created story (Minestrone, 2010, p. 116) in which four specific conditions are created: involvement of the interlocutor's private spheres; a change in memory, emotion, knowledge, or ability; an effort corresponding to an unconscious need and the feeling of having taken part in an activity (O'Sullivan & Spangler, 1998, p. 23).

For all these reasons, as Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 36) state, experiences have become today, even more, real multidimensional driving moments and a primary starting point in brand design.

When brands design experiences, they must also consider the design of emotions. Through their applications, brands can refer to personal associations, experiences, and memories, becoming for the interlocutor like "special objects" (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg, 1981, p. 189) or entities that evoke special memories and essential lived experiences. Therefore, as people bond with objects, places, or people, they can build stronger bonds with brands. Norman would say, "Instead, what matters is the history of interaction, the associations that people have with the objects, and the memories they evoke" (Norman, 2004, p. 45).

Brands are now living organisms, and they place emotions at the centre. They are flexible organisations capable of responding quickly to external world changes that affect social, cultural, and technological development. These multidimensional realities, therefore, allow any interlocutor to identify and immerse her/himself in the dimension that is most suitable for her/him. Brands have several “worlds” in which they operate, exist, and interact with the interlocutors. The experiences that consumers make of brands, however, still take place in physical places but increasingly in virtual places: in a hybrid place between physical and digital. These are the touchplaces.

In this sense, we can replace the word touchpoint with the word touchplace because we now refer to an ecosystem of sensations and experiences that develop through the interaction and co-presence of four distinct areas found within the dimension of that place: the emotional, relational, cognitive, and performative spheres. The touchpoint’s goal is to lead the potential consumer to purchase a good; instead, the touchpoint’s purpose is to develop a deep connection with the interlocutor. While the point, by definition, is confined and singular, the place, on the other hand, is a relational centre rich with relationships, emotions, and experiences. Brand-person interaction cannot be built by the accumulation of many small isolated points; rather, it must be designed by studying a living ecosystem that can adapt, mould, and form itself alongside the person experiencing it.

5 LdC: an interpretative model

The touchplace (LdC = Luogo di Contatto in Italian) is a multidimensional and sociological spatial environment, circumscribed and connoted materially and/or immaterially from a communicative perspective. In this environment, the interlocutor experiences through communicative acts a personal and meaningful experience. According to the proposed touchplace model, branding involves recognising the experience’s value as superior to the purchase’s. The model aims to define a meaningful and valuable experience that can be expanded, modified, and implemented over time, serving as a foundation for strategic planning and design objectives. Developed as part of a Master’s Thesis in Communication Design at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano (Finesso, 2022), the authors have further discussed and refined the model.

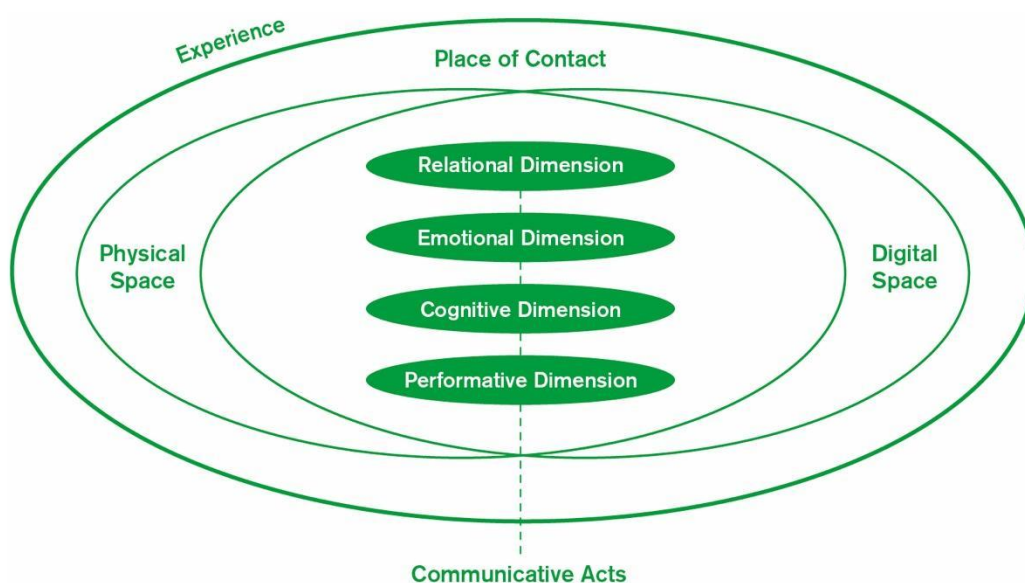


Figure 1. Representation of the spatial manifestation of the touchplace (LdC). Source: Finesso & Guida, 2022.

The touchplace (LdC) (Fig. 1) is manifested in a physical, digital or hybrid space. Inside, it has four dimensions (Relational, Emotional, Cognitive and Performative), which contain the various communicative acts the interlocutor can perform.

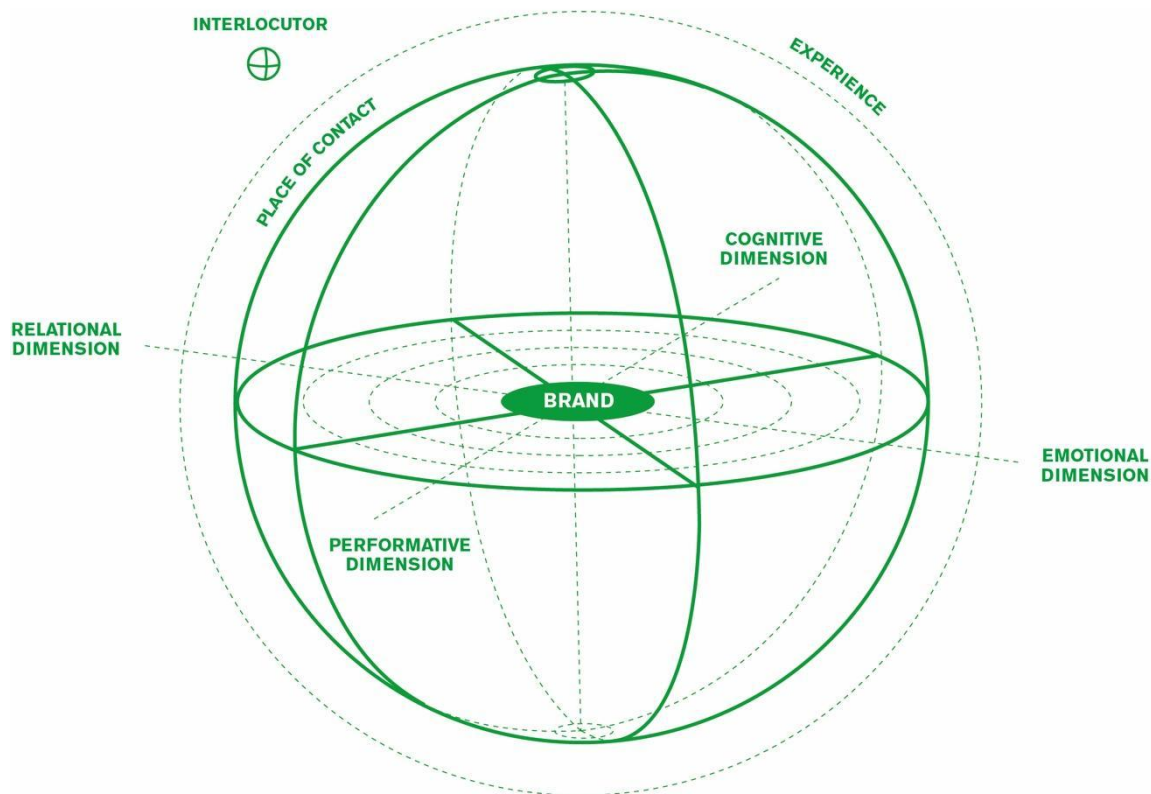


Figure 2. Interpretative model of the touchplace (LdC). Source: Finesso & Guida, 2022.

In the actual model (Fig. 2), the brand (the subject) is a multi-component organism structured in several dimensions. These areas develop through a mutable relationship of reciprocity and are organised in different ways according to the occasion, the target, and the brand’s intentions. Through a strategic overview, the touchplace (Place of Contact) thus becomes an environment formed by factors regulated and coordinated with each other under a single common direction.

Outside the sphere – representing immersion and communicative involvement – there is the interlocutor. She/he can move freely to, in and from the touchplace, simultaneously experiencing multiple dimensions. In this way, the interlocutors can live, at the same time, personal and meaningful experiences based on their objectives.

Each dimension presents, as mentioned, several communicative acts. These represent all the actions and/or behaviours of different natures and purposes the interlocutor can experience within the touchplace (Fig. 3). Through comparison and a subdivision by theme and objective, 24 communicative acts have been identified. These can assume greater or lesser importance depending on the purposes for which the touchplace is designed. Although they have different matrices, in some cases, the acts can be shared by more than one dimension, thus bringing out the relationship between the spherical segments highlighted in the interpretative touchplace model.

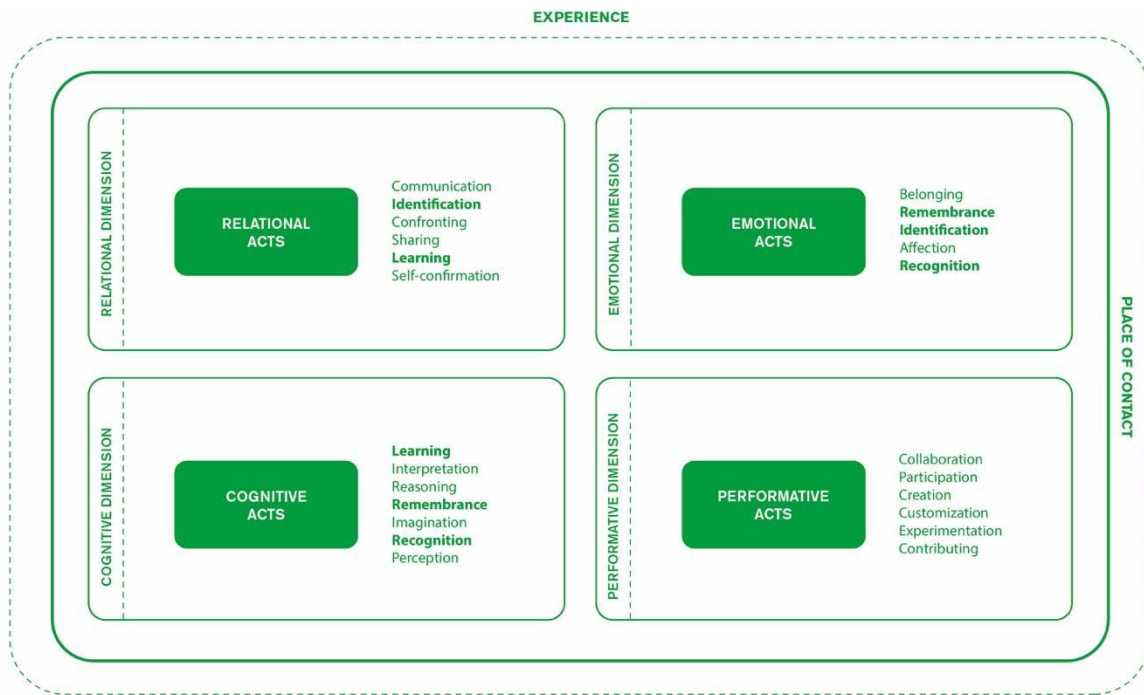


Figure 3. Classification of communicative acts. Source: Finesso & Guida, 2022.

The emotional dimension within the management of the touchplace relies on the interlocutor’s feelings, experiences, and affective processes. It constitutes the spherical segment of greater thickness, as emerges in the case of Travis Scott’s virtual concert, Astronomical, held on Fortnite in 2019 (Fig. 4). Astronomical aims to stimulate and awaken strong emotions due to a perceptive and immersive enhancement of the elements that define the touchplace thanks to the virtual and physical stimulation of the senses such as sight, hearing, and touch. The feeling of belonging aroused by sharing the event online, combined with the strong sense of identification, affection, and recognition towards the rapper and the touchplace itself (the online videogame environment), is the key to creating an experience with high emotional involvement.

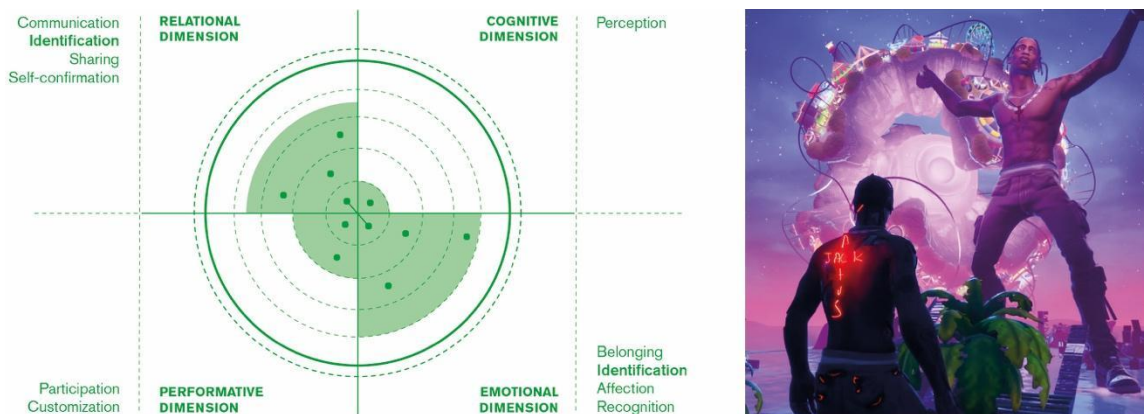


Figure 4. Spherical section of the Astronomical touchplace. Source: Finesso & Guida, 2022.

On the other hand, cognitive processes involving perception, inferential approaches, learning, and information processing are implemented in the cognitive dimension. In the cognitive dimension, as in the case of Gucci Circolo (Fig. 5), the interlocutor processes and assimilates tangible inputs from the surrounding environment (thanks to the interiors’ textiles or materials), or intangible ones, like

perfume, taste, or sound. In the listening or screening lounges, the tearoom and the Gucci 100 collection, the interlocutor touches and recognises the Gucci universe and imaginary made of contemporaneity, innovation, history, and art. On the other hand, the performative dimension encourages the interlocutors to take action. Gucci Circolo is mainly based on two communicative acts: experimentation and participation. Through experimentation, the interlocutor can test the photo booth, create playlists, and try the Gucci Arcade video games to parade in the reproduction of the Aria walkway. At the same time, thanks to the act of participation, she/he can attend conferences, talks, screenings, and workshops, through which she/he actively takes part in the world of the brand, thus becoming a dialoguing actor within the touchplace.

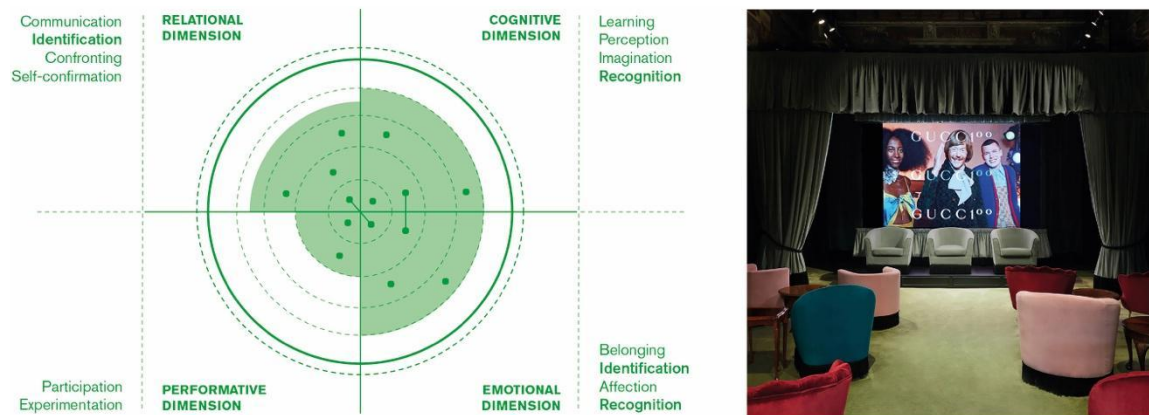


Figure 5. Spherical section of the Gucci Circolo touchplace. Source: Finesso & Guida, 2022.

The relational dimension is based on the principle that the touchplace is a sociological and anthropological reality formed by ties and connections. Although the touchplace constituted by Crak TapRoom, unlike the previous case studies, is a site made up entirely of physical components, it is configured as a multifaceted place. Above all, thanks to the relational dimension (Fig. 6), it constantly evolves according to the activities proposed by the brand. People who choose to experience TapRoom want to share moments and socialise with friends and those present, having a common passion for the territory and the craftsmanship. By sharing a place focused on the brand’s ‘human factor’, the interlocutor is led to share opinions, doubts, and aspirations to strengthen their identity and live an individual and collective experience.

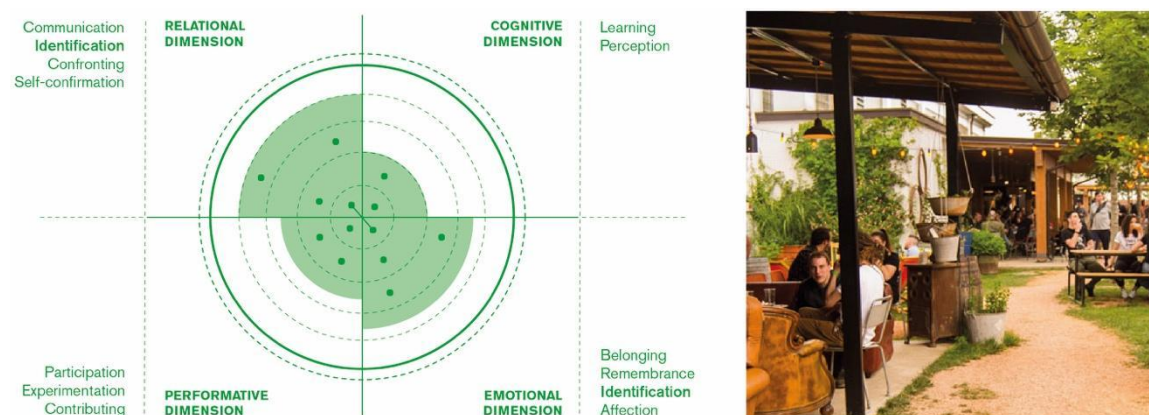


Figure 6. Spherical section of the Crak TapRoom touchplace. Source: Finesso & Guida, 2022.

6 Conclusions

The case studies, analysed from a qualitative point of view, were intended to highlight the role of the concept of place in the evolution of some brands, intentionally identified in different dimensions and areas of relevance. Brand and place, as already discussed, are characterised by elements such as identity, history, culture, relationships, character, and emotions. Thus, they share a dual nature, material and immaterial. Previously, touchpoints between brand and interlocutor were mainly highly visible, physical, and limited, as in the cases of a store or an event. Today, brands can offer hybrid experiences with a highly invisible component thanks to new technologies, increasingly exploiting the virtual and digital space. Furthermore, new opportunities are already appearing in the metaverse dimension.

Designing the customer journey through touchplaces, therefore, ensures that the interlocutors can feel like actors in the brand's world, identify with it and establish a strong sense of belonging toward values and imagery. Change is an indispensable element for the development of future companies. Conceiving brands by touchplaces is the key to offering the interlocutor a changeable and adaptable experience, depending on the evolution of external factors over time.

If, at first, brands and places could be designed in very distinct and selling-oriented ways, this is no longer the case. People want to live meaningful experiences, feel they belong to dialogic realities that are a source of inspiration and innovation, build relationships and identify with what surrounds them. All these dimensions belong to the sphere of communication design.

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