







# Colophon

**diid**  
**disegno industriale**  
**industrial design**  
**No. 80 — 2023**

**Year**  
XXI

diid is an open access  
peer-reviewed scientific  
design journal

diid is published  
three times a year

Registration at Tribunale  
di Roma 86/2002  
(March 6, 2002)

www.diid.it

Print subscription  
(3 issues)  
Euro 60,00  
Subscription office  
ordini@buponline.it

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**Publisher**  
Fondazione  
Bologna University Press  
Via Saragozza 10  
40123 Bologna  
Tel. (+39) 051 232 882  
Fax (+39) 051 221 019  
www.buponline.com  
info@buponline.com

**ISSN**  
1594-8528

**ISSN Online**  
2785-2245

**DOI**  
10.30682/diid8023

**ISBN**  
979-12-5477-354-3

**ISBN Online**  
979-12-5477-355-0

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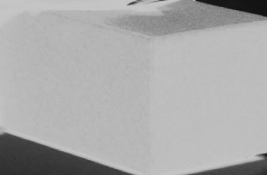
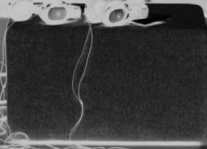
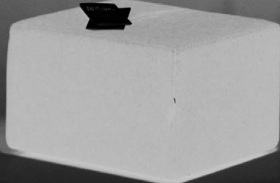
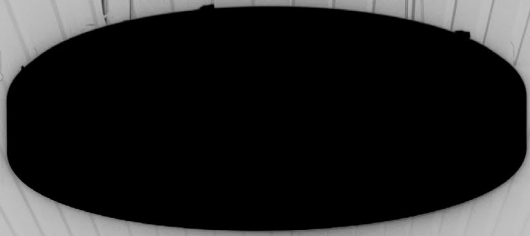
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# Editorial

6

## **Editorial**

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# Open Debate

10

## **Decentering Design With AI**

Andrea Cattabriga, Vladan Joler

22

## **A Perspective on AI and Data in Design. Interview With Kate Crawford**

Kate Crawford, Vladan Joler,  
Andrea Cattabriga

32

## **Designing More-Than-Human AI: Experiments on Situated Conversations and Silences**

Iohanna Nicenboim, Elisa Giaccardi,  
Johan Redström

44

## **AI in Africa. Preliminary Notes on Design and Adoption**

Muhammad Adamu, Makuochi Nkwo

58

## **AI Fantasy and (Anti) Co-Creative Machines. On Singularity Dadaism, Syntropic Counterpoints and Design**

Predrag K. Nikolić, Giacomo Bertin

## **Stories**

70

## **Experiments on Shaping a Narrative Around AI**

# Designrama

84

**Do-It-Yourself Design in Times of Oil Crisis: From *Nomadic Furniture* to *Metamobile* (1973–74)**

Sofia Nannini

96

**Metamorphing Design Education. A Master Program Based on Soft, Digital and Green Skills for Designers Dealing with Future Scenarios**

Giuseppe Lotti, Margherita Vacca, Fabio Ballerini

108

**The Brand as a Place. For a Model Interpreting the Behavior of Brands**

Elisa Finesso, Francesco E. Guida

120

**Seamlessness and Monomateriality in Sustainable Garment Design. A Knit/Woven Trouser Prototype**

Ludovica Rosato, Juri-Apollo Drews, Antoine Tour, Jean-François Bassereau, Aurélie Mosse

132

**Floating Nautical Heritage. Case Studies and Experimental Proposal for Proximity Museums**

Maria Carola Morozzo della Rocca, Massimo Musio-Sale, Giulia Zappia

142

**Disruptive ideas for outer space through design. How design can play a strategic role beyond the earth**

Annalisa Dominoni

# Forum and Reviews

**Over the Mainstream**

156

**Design Ethics for Including Those on the Margins**

Päivi Ahvonen, Satu Miettinen

**Cultural and Creative Industries**

168

**Rediscovering the Act of Listening**

Stefano Luca

# The Brand as a Place. For a Model Interpreting the Behavior of Brands

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## Abstract

What if the brand is a place? In specialist literature, the brand interacts through a series of tangible and intangible *touchpoints* with its interlocutors. Whether it is points of sale, events, websites, packaging and products, the interlocutor enters the world of the brand and experiences it through these touchpoints. However, a brand must adapt its behaviours and modulate its identity and expressions based on conditions and context. In this article, we propose a transition from the definition of touchpoint to *touchplace* in the system of relations between the brand and the audience. The concept of place, like that of the brand, contemplates *spirit, personality* and *character*. Like each brand, each place has its own *identity* and *moral character*. An original interpretation model will highlight the evolution of brands' behaviours and how these places of exchange and meeting are key elements in offering relevant experiences to their interlocutors.

## Keywords

Branding  
Touchpoint  
Place  
Experience  
Model



## Introduction

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 have undergone substantial changes today: new markets, the evolution of the consumer figure, and hybridisation between the physical and digital worlds.

In this context, brands need to move towards a branding model capable of demonstrating qualities such as agility, adaptability, multidimensionality, attachment, and coherence. They must be able to modulate their identity and expressions to meet the expectation individuals have to experience a remarkable moment with the brand through interactions and emotions (Barison, 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) located in people’s minds.

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 be in touch with its audience? What if the brand is a place?

## Uncertainty as the Only Certainty

Over the centuries, society has been configured as a constantly moving organism, a living being continuously evolving. In this evolutionary perspective, Bauman outlined the concept of *liquid modernity*, defining the first decade of the 2000s as the most frenetic phase of globalisation. 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, relentlessly searching for novelty, can experience infinite possibilities.

In 2020, the world faced an unparalleled global pandemic, resulting in unprecedented changes, uncertainties, and the widespread restructuring of various aspects of life. This crisis blurred the boundaries between the physical and digital domains, giving rise to a unique synergy encompassing space, individuals, and algorithms.

In such a context, more than in the past, brands must be *agile* to hold a strong position in the market. 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 find-

ing 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, n.d.).

In a scenario where consumer expectations evolve, brands are also called upon to become *dialogic* actors. Nowadays, any company, corporation or activity is constantly in the spotlight. Consumers are becoming increasingly attentive, and are making decisions to choose brands based not only on reviews, sponsors and supporters of the product or price but also 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).

Brands must finally be able to maintain a “clear, coherent and authentic personality” over the years (Olins, 2015, p. 83) to address 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).

### **Brand and Place: A Particular Similarity**

In this scenario of changes involving the idea of place, it becomes crucial to clarify specific definitions to support our thesis. Distinguishing between *place* and *space* is pivotal, as they represent distinct concepts. 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 quantified using coordinates (latitude and longitude) and adheres to a mathematical and scientific framework. Conversely, the place is an intrinsic socio-cultural entity defined by specific attributes that contribute to shaping one’s identity. When we delve into the concept of place, we delve into history, culture, values, relationships, subjectivity, and meanings. As Tagliapietra (2005) eloquently states, “space is thought, places are inhabited. Space is traversed, in places one stops”.

Nevertheless, going beyond the spatial and qualitative distinctions between these terms, it is pertinent to explore five shared characteristics that both brand and place possess to address the initial question: “Is a brand a place?”.

*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 is composed of a tangible dimension, represented by its visibility and concreteness, and an intangible dimension, represented by its character and essence, which embodies a semiotic, social and cultural dimension. It is the same for a place.

*Emotional Spaces.* Brand and place are subjective and emotionally lived realities imbued with perceptions and feelings. Here, in these realities, the subjectivity of the individual 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 that it transmits to the individual subject. These are mental territories "of the heart" with which, similarly to "favourite objects", as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) point out, special memories and emotional connections are built.

*Spirit, Personality, and Character.* Place and brand contain "a single entity", a spirit and a character of their own. A place exactly like a brand is "a concrete here, with its particular identity" (Norberg-Schulz, 1979, p. 24). According to psychological research (Goodwin et al., 2015), a brand has a moral character that is of primary importance in consumer evaluation (Khamitov & Duclos, 2018). 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 (Wheeler, 2018, pp. 30-31).

*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.

*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 our minds, becoming 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. The concept of place identity, like that of brand identification, often coincides with humans' natural habit of identifying themselves 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).

## 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”. These elements represent any communicative item present along the interlocutors’ customer journey and play a fundamental function in building a stable relationship with the brand. 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). According to Minestrini (2011, p. 68), touchpoints are the “bricks” of the customers’ experience and can assist them 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 is possible to build an enduring preference and a strong link with the brand.

This process has undergone substantial changes due to changing consumer behaviour and preferences and the practices of using the touchpoints. The purchase decision-making process has gone from linear, as established by the AIDA funnel model, to circular (Court et al., 2009). Then, as Rennie et al. (2020) highlighted in Google’s Messy Middle model, it became more complex due to a network of contacts between brand and consumer that is increasingly personal and differentiated from user to user. Google’s 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, the purchase decision-making process an experience that is no longer point-like but multifaceted.

Experiences are not objective and situations governable through empirical measurements; on the contrary, they are subjective phenomena characterised by three fundamental elements: beliefs, emotions, and sensations (Harari, 2017). As Pine and Gilmore (1999) state, experiences today have become increasingly real multidimensional driving moments and a primary starting point in brand design. Brands are now *living organisms* (van Nes, 2013), 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 interlocutors to identify and immerse themselves in the most suitable dimension. Brands have several “worlds” in which they operate, exist, and interact with their interlocutors. The experiences that consumers make of brands, however, still take place in physical places but increasingly in virtual places as well: consumers experience brands in a hybrid place between physical and digital. They experience brands in *touchplaces*.

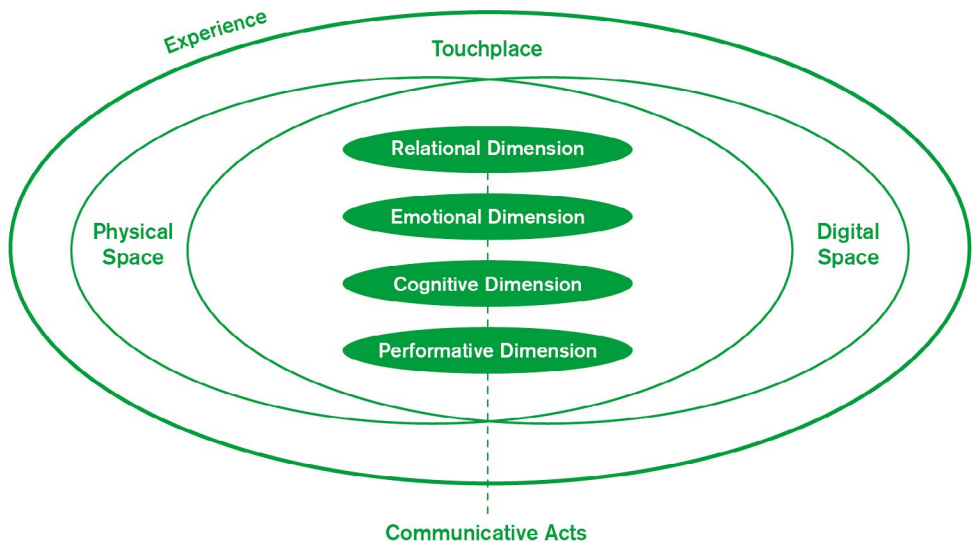
Consequently, it is possible to propose replacing the word *touchpoint* with the new term *touchplace*. We will refer to an ecosystem of sensations and experiences that develop through the interaction and

co-presence of four distinct areas within the place: the Emotional, Relational, Cognitive, and Performative dimensions. The *touchpoint*'s goal is to lead the potential consumer to purchase a good, while the *touchplace*'s purpose is to develop a deep connection with the interlocutors. 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-interlocutor interaction cannot be built by accumulating many small, isolated points; rather, it must be designed by studying a living ecosystem that can adapt, mould, and form alongside the person experiencing it.

### LdC: An Interpretative Model

The touchplace (*LdC* = *Luogo di Contatto* in Italian) is a multidimensional and sociological spatial environment, circumscribed and connoted from a communicative point of view materially and/or immaterially, in which the interlocutor, through communicative acts, experiences a personal and meaningful experience.

According to this definition of touchplace, branding involves recognising the value of the experience as superior to that of the purchase. The proposed 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. The touchplace Fig. 1 is manifested in a physical, digital or hybrid space. The four dimensions mentioned above (Relational, Emotional, Cognitive and Performative Dimension) contain the various communicative acts the interlocutors can perform.

Fig. 1  
Representation of the spatial manifestation of the touchplace (LdC), credits Finesso and Guida, 2022.

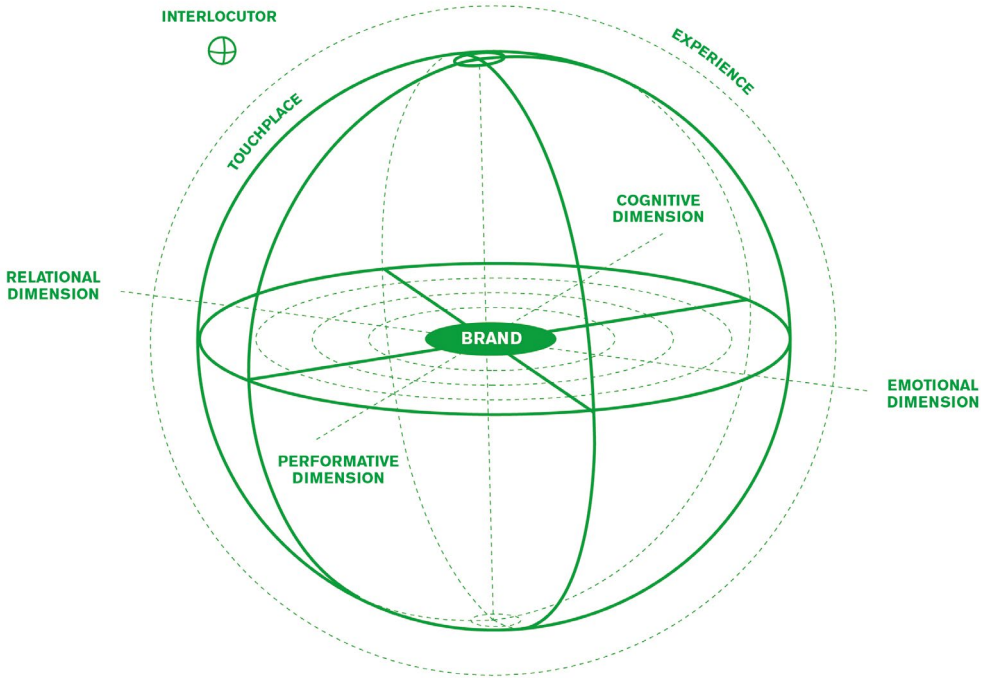


Fig. 2 Interpretative model of the touchplace (LdC), credits Finesso and Guida, 2022.

In the proposed interpretative 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 differently depending on the occasion, the target, and the brand's intentions. Through a strategic overview, the touchplace 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 – is the Interlocutor, who can move freely in and from the touchplace, simultaneously experiencing multiple dimensions. In this way, the interlocutors can, at the same time, live personal and meaningful experiences based on their objectives.

Each dimension, as mentioned above, presents several Communicative Acts. These represent all the actions and/or behaviours of different natures and purposes that the interlocutors 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 multiple dimensions, thus bringing out the relationship between the spherical segments highlighted in the interpretative touchplace model Fig. 2. We will refer to three case studies of various scales to evaluate the application of the interpretative model and observe any ramifications. These case studies are thus examined through an analysis based on qualitative assessments and considerations and an emphasis on experience.

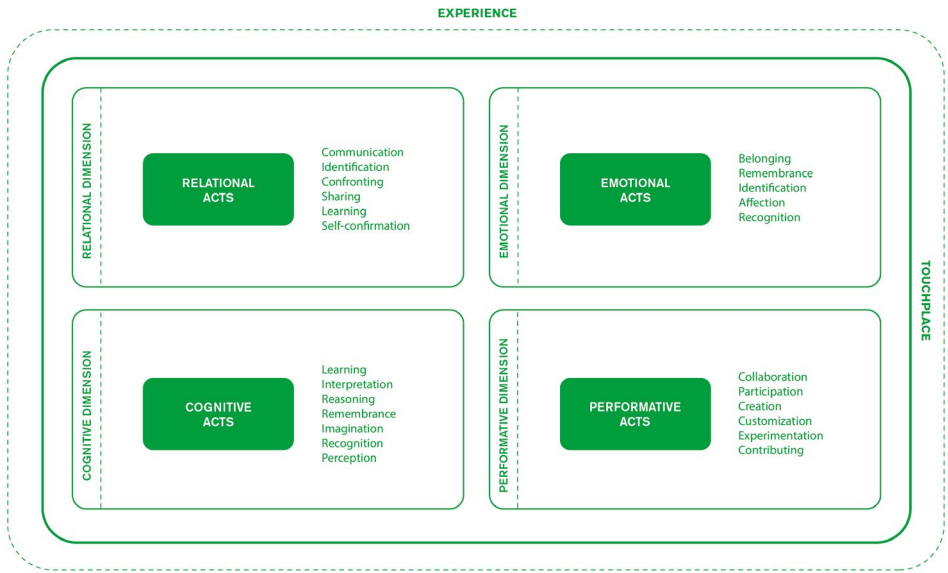


Fig. 3  
Classification of Communicative Acts, credits Finesso and Guida, 2022.

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 (the online videogame environment), is the key to creating an experience with high emotional involvement.

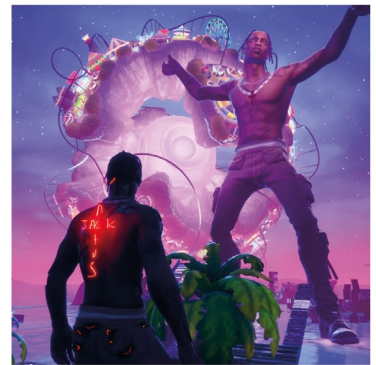
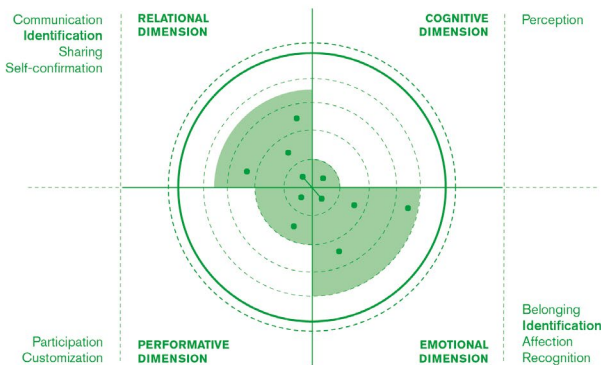


Fig. 4  
Spherical section of the *Astronomical* touchplace (Finesso, 2022). The image is an extract from the concert (source [www.thevego.com](http://www.thevego.com)).

On the other hand, cognitive processes involving perception, inferential approaches, learning, and information processing are implemented in the *cognitive dimension*. In this dimension, as in the case of *Gucci Circolo* Fig. 5, the interlocutor processes and assimilates the inputs from the surrounding environment, tangible such as a textile

or material, or intangible such as 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 act. *Gucci Circolo* is based mainly 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, he can attend conferences, talks, screenings and workshops, through which he actively takes part in the world of the brand, thus becoming a dialoguing actor within the touchplace.

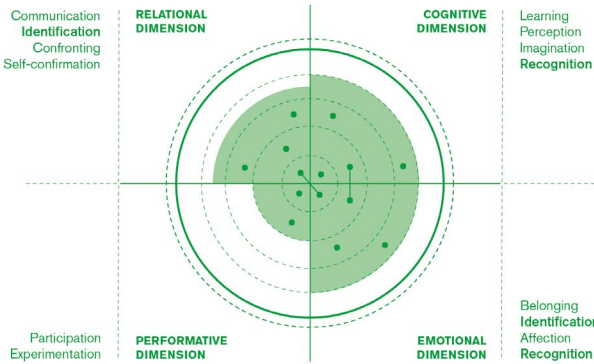
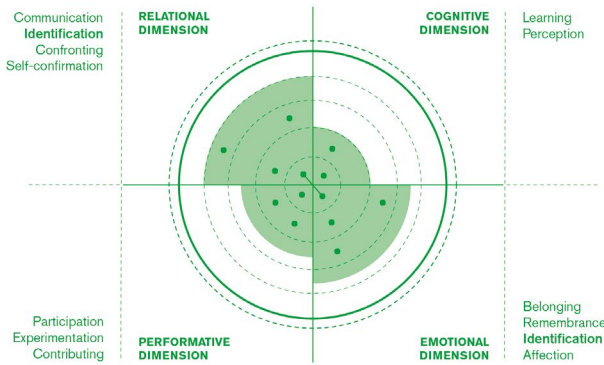


Fig. 5  
Spherical section of the *Gucci Circolo* touchplace (Finesso, 2022). The image refers to the screening lounge (source [www.vogue.it](http://www.vogue.it)).

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 depending on 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.





## Conclusions

The qualitative analysis of the three case studies aimed to underscore the role of the place concept in the evolution of several brands, deliberately chosen across various dimensions and areas of relevance. As previously discussed, both brands and places share intrinsic elements such as identity, history, culture, relationships, character, and emotions, thus embodying a dual nature encompassing material and immaterial aspects.

Previously, touchpoints between brands and their audiences were primarily physical and overtly visible, often confined to settings such as physical stores or events. However, contemporary brands offer hybrid experiences with a significant invisible component, thanks to the expanding realm of virtual and digital spaces. Moreover, new opportunities are already emerging within the metaverse dimension.

Designing the customer journey through touchplaces ensures that the interlocutors can feel like actors in the world of the brand, identify with it and establish a strong sense of belonging toward values and imagery. As we have observed, change is an essential element for the growth of future-oriented 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.

Fig. 6

Spherical section of the *Crak TapRoom* touchplace (Finesso, 2022). The image refers to *TapRoom's* outdoors (source Facebook, @crakbrewerytaproom).

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She earned a Bachelor's degree in Industrial and Multimedia Design from IUAV in Venice and a Master's degree in Communication Design from Politecnico di Milano with a research thesis investigating a branding model for a changing world. She is now a junior visual graphic designer focusing on brand identities and content creation.

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**Printed in October 2023 by Bologna University Press**



In the nexus of design and Artificial Intelligence (AI), the convergence of ethical, political, and creative facets demands a decentralized approach guided by data justice and posthumanism. As AI's reach expands into societal and environmental spheres, the imperative is not neutral but deeply entangled with socio-political contexts and power structures. The shift from tech-centricity to collective needs dovetails with the urgency for non-anthropocentric design, particularly with autonomous agents. This global perspective challenges "for good" narratives and raises questions about digital colonialism, while artistic experiments redefine the boundaries of creativity and aesthetics, compelling a holistic reevaluation of design's role in AI's multifaceted impact.  
Flaviano Celaschi

80

No. 80 — 2023  
Anno XXI  
ISSN 1594-8528  
ISSN Online 2785-2245



Bologna  
University Press

Euro 27,00

ISBN 979-12-5477-246-1



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