

Beyond Sight: Multi-Sensory Brand Experiences in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital landscape, brands are moving beyond visual engagement to craft immersive, multi-sensory experiences. This paper explores how sound, touch, scent, and taste are being integrated into virtual and hybrid platforms through technologies like haptics, ambient audio, digital scent diffusion, and AR/VR. By analysing successful brand case studies, the paper highlights how multi-sensory marketing strengthens emotional connection, memory recall, and consumer loyalty. Grounded in consumer psychology and neuroscience, the study also addresses ethical and accessibility considerations. It concludes with a forward-looking discussion on how sensory branding will evolve in the metaverse and Web 4.0, where digital and physical experiences will seamlessly converge. This paper offers valuable insights for marketers, designers, and experience architects seeking to humanize brand interactions in the digital age.

KEYWORDS: Multi Sensory marketing, Brand Experiences, Digital Media, Social media marketing, Buying behaviour, Digital Era.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital economy, consumers are constantly bombarded with visual stimuli from brands across platforms-social media, e-commerce websites, mobile apps, and digital advertisements. While visual branding remains essential, relying solely on sight is increasingly inadequate in an overcrowded market where attention spans are shrinking. The human brain, however, is wired to process and remember information more effectively when multiple senses are engaged. Multi-sensory branding, therefore, offers a compelling alternative to purely visual marketing, fostering deeper emotional engagement and stronger brand associations. This paper aims to explore how brands are evolving their strategies to incorporate non-visual sensory elements in digital environments. Through an interdisciplinary lens that combines sensory marketing, consumer psychology, and digital innovation, the paper highlights how sound, touch, smell, and even taste are being reimagined for virtual experiences. The goal is to uncover how multi-sensory branding can contribute to a more immersive and differentiated brand presence in an increasingly intangible digital world.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SENSORY BRANDING

The foundational theory underpinning multi-sensory branding is rooted in the work of scholars such as Aradhna Krishna (2012), who defines sensory marketing as marketing that engages consumers' senses and affects their perception, judgment, and behaviour. Her research emphasizes that multisensory stimuli lead to richer and more enduring consumer-brand relationships. Complementing this is the theory of embodied cognition, which posits that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the world. In a digital context, this theory suggests that even simulated sensory experiences-such as a virtual texture or auditory cue-can trigger real emotional and cognitive responses. Furthermore, Pine and Gilmore's (1999) "Experience Economy" framework underscores the importance of staging memorable experiences rather than merely delivering functional services or products, an approach that aligns seamlessly with the multi-sensory branding paradigm.

3. THE EVOLUTION FROM VISUAL TO MULTI-SENSORY BRANDING

Historically, branding has leaned heavily on visual identity-logos, colors, typography, and design. However, as brands began exploring in-store atmospherics, they discovered the impact of sound (e.g., background music), scent (e.g., fragrance marketing), and tactile elements (e.g., packaging texture) on consumer behaviour. The digital revolution initially reduced the sensory richness of branding, focusing mainly on screens and pixels. Yet, emerging technologies such as AR, VR, and digital wearables are now reversing this trend, enabling brands to engage senses beyond sight even in virtual environments. Brands like Apple, Starbucks, and Singapore Airlines have long understood the power of multisensory identity, extending their brand language to encompass soundscapes, scents, and even the feel of their products and services. Today, the challenge lies in translating these elements into digital formats without losing their emotional potency.

4. DIMENSIONS OF MULTI-SENSORY BRANDING IN THE DIGITAL ERA

A. Sound and Sonic Branding

Sound has become a powerful tool in digital branding. Sonic logos-short, distinctive audio signatures-are increasingly used to enhance brand recall and emotional resonance. Netflix's "ta-dum" or Intel's five-note chime are examples of sonic branding that instantly evoke recognition. Mastercard recently launched a comprehensive sonic brand identity that plays across point-of-sale systems, commercials, and mobile apps, creating a consistent auditory experience. In a world of podcasts, voice assistants, and audio-first platforms like Clubhouse, brands that fail to develop a sound identity risk becoming invisible in auditory spaces.

B. Touch and Haptic Technology

Touch is perhaps the most difficult sense to replicate digitally, yet innovations in haptic technology are making this increasingly possible. Mobile apps and gaming devices now use haptic feedback to simulate texture or motion. For example, fashion and beauty brands are using virtual try-on technologies with haptic cues to simulate the feel of fabrics or the application of makeup. VR gloves and wearable devices are pushing the boundaries of what is possible, offering opportunities for immersive shopping experiences that include tactile sensations.

C. Smell and Digital Olfaction

Smell remains the least explored and most challenging sense in the digital space due to technological limitations. However, experimental

devices like digital scent emitters are beginning to enter the market. In hospitality and luxury real estate, brands have experimented with VR environments that incorporate scent dispensers to simulate real-world experiences. Although still in its infancy, digital olfaction holds promise for adding a new emotional layer to virtual experiences.

D. Taste and Synesthetic Branding

Taste, like smell, is inherently physical, but brands have found creative ways to evoke it digitally. Food and beverage companies use descriptive language, imagery, and even auditory cues to stimulate taste perception. Coca-Cola's advertisements, for example, often pair visuals of condensation and fizzing sounds with nostalgic storytelling to evoke the taste experience. Some experimental campaigns have explored synesthetic storytelling, where visuals and music are used to simulate the feeling of taste.

5. CASE STUDIES IN MULTI-SENSORY DIGITAL BRANDING

Coca-Cola has been a pioneer in crafting multi-sensory campaigns that blend sight, sound, and narrative. Its use of augmented reality filters, interactive vending machines, and localized music tracks aims to create immersive and emotionally engaging experiences. Nike's virtual retail stores combine ambient soundscapes, interactive digital mirrors, and motion sensors to offer a hybrid physical-digital shopping journey. Lush Cosmetics, known for its sensory-rich in-store experience, has made efforts to translate that into its digital presence through storytelling, virtual consultations, and product videos that highlight texture and aroma. These examples demonstrate that sensory branding is not confined to physical locations but can be effectively extended into virtual experiences through creativity and technology.

6. NEUROMARKETING INSIGHTS AND CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT

Neuromarketing studies have shown that multi-sensory experiences activate a broader range of neural pathways, increasing both emotional engagement and memory retention. fMRI and EEG scans reveal that when multiple senses are stimulated simultaneously, consumers show heightened attention and stronger brand recall. These findings validate the investment in multi-sensory strategies, particularly in competitive digital environments where differentiation is key. Moreover, personalized sensory experiences-such as voice-activated shopping or haptics tailored to user behaviour-can deepen brand affinity and satisfaction. However, these must be implemented with sensitivity to user preferences and privacy.

7. CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While the potential of multi-sensory branding is vast, it is not without challenges. Technological limitations, particularly in replicating taste and smell, remain significant. Over-stimulation of senses or poorly integrated experiences can lead to user discomfort or brand dilution. Ethical concerns also arise around data collection, especially when biometric data (e.g., emotional responses or sensory preferences) is involved. Inclusivity is another crucial issue. Sensory branding must account for diverse user needs, including those with sensory impairments, to avoid excluding segments of the population.

8. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR MULTI-SENSORY INTEGRATION

Brands aiming to adopt a multi-sensory approach should begin by auditing existing consumer touchpoints and identifying opportunities for sensory enhancement. A "Digital Sensory Mapping" process can help align sensory inputs with brand values and user expectations. Prototyping with immersive technologies like VR and conducting neuromarketing tests can ensure that the experiences are both effective and ethical. Ultimately, a successful multi-sensory strategy must be coherent, contextually appropriate, and emotionally resonant. It should enhance the brand story rather than distract from it.

9. CONCLUSION

In the digital era, where screens have become the dominant interface, the reintroduction of sensory

richness offers a pathway toward more human-centered brand experiences. Multi-sensory branding is not merely an aesthetic choice-it is a strategic imperative. Brands that engage multiple senses can create more immersive, memorable, and emotionally resonant connections with their audiences. As technology continues to evolve, the boundary between physical and digital experiences will blur further. Those brands that are prepared to innovate beyond sight will be better positioned to thrive in the experience-driven economy of the future.

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