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Towards Perpetual Brand–Consumer Relationships

Branded Product Platforms (BPPs) orchestrate the joint value creation by its platform participants to occupy consumers' entire need categories. They thereby evolve the brand-consumer relationship, allowing brands to foster intimate and perpetually ongoing interactions with consumers that transcend the traditional customer journey.

Dr. Julian R. K. Wichmann, Dr. Nico Wiegand, Prof. Dr. Werner J. Reinartz

The digitalization of consumers' daily lives has provided brands with an interface to the consumer that is more open than ever, allowing for engagement anytime and anywhere. This paves the way for Branded Product Platforms (BPPs) in which brands are no longer the sole creators of consumer value but leverage digital platform structures to orchestrate the joint value creation among platform participants within the context of a broader need category. Brands are thereby able to enter a state of 'ambient embeddedness', which refers to the integration of processes, products, and communications into consumers' routines, making them present in their immediate environment and an integral part of everyday life (Reinartz, Wiegand, & Imschloss, 2019).

Take, for example, Under Armour (UA) and its Connected Fitness platform. Here, UA does not only sell sportswear but allows consumers to plan and track workouts, engage with a community and celebrities, and take part in sponsored challenges. UA's BPP creates comprehensive value in the broader context of an active and healthy lifestyle and occupies greater parts of this need category by enabling interactions of consumers with other platform participants. As a result, consumers use the BPP frequently, sometimes on a daily basis, and over extended periods of time.

BPPs are thus uniquely able to create superior and ongoing value that fosters profound and perpetuated relationships with consumers. This value creation can be entirely independent of an actual purchase and therefore transcends the traditional customer journey and CRM practices by serving consumers instead of customers. As a result, the relationship between consumers and brands is on the verge of a new evolutionary step.

This article shows 1) how BPPs are uniquely able to build profound relationships, 2) what kinds of value emerge for consumers, and 3) how BPPs are designed and governed. Finally, we derive implications for how BPPs will change branding strategies of the future.

Understanding BPPs

BPPs are platforms owned and operated by a brand that extend the brand's core offering within the context of a need category by enabling, encouraging, and orchestrating ongoing interactions among platform participants (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018; Reinartz, Wiegand, & Imschloss, 2019). Platform participants may include consumers, 3rd party brands, and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. Consumers can access a BPP through various channels such as apps, websites, or smart devices.

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While full-fledged BPPs are still rare, some BPPs besides that of UA exist. For example, Runtastic (Adidas) and NikePlus allow consumers to interact with AI-powered coaches and a community of consumers and celebrities. Mercedes Me provides consumers with content, 3rd party services, and suggestions for trips and scenic routes.

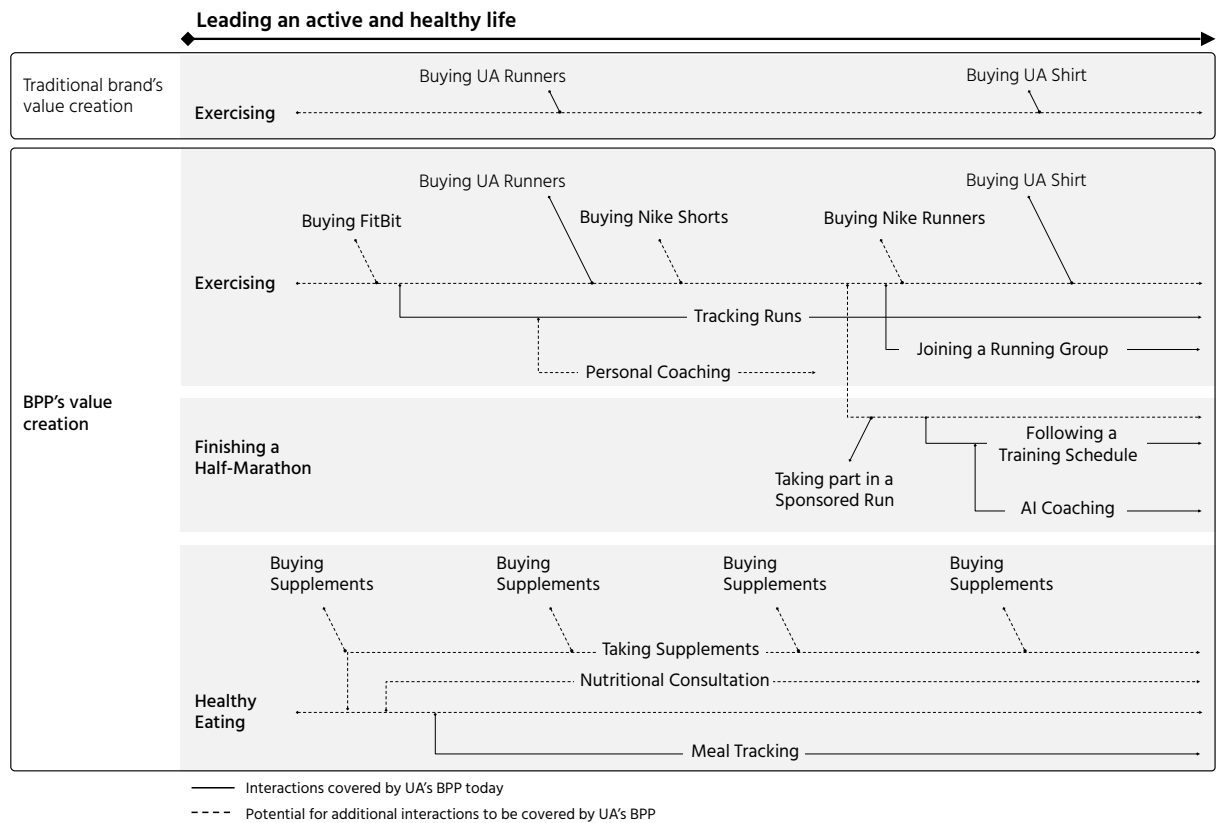
The following sections describe in greater detail how BPPs

- extend value creation beyond discrete exchanges towards the occupation of entire need categories,
- use platform structures to create value in an economically viable manner, and
- give rise to four distinct types of consumer value.

BPPs Occupy Consumers' Need Categories

Brands have always tried to maintain a relationship with consumers beyond the mere purchase, for example by providing consumer experiences, engaging with them on social media, or offering additional product features in apps (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009). These efforts, however, often fall short of managers' expectations, as they only capture consumers' attention on singular occasions. Therefore, the value they create is too limited to motivate an ongoing and active relationship.

Fig. 1: Traditional versus BPPs' Value Creation



Source: Own illustration.

BPPs fix this shortcoming by transcending single exchanges by occupying consumers' broader need categories.

Following means-end theory (Pieters, Baumgartner, & Allen, 1995), consumers' purchases are a means to pursue a chain of superseding goals. The further you move along this chain, the more abstract, perpetual, and profound these goals become. On the highest level, consumers formulate life goals along their ideal self-identity which is never completely attainable but represents a continuous pursuit (Belk, 1988). For instance, a consumer may formulate the superordinate goal to be active and healthy, which motivates the more specific goal of exercising more or eating healthier. This, in turn, leads to various lower-level goals that direct consumers' actions and purchases (e.g., purchasing sportswear).

As shown in Figure 1 (upper part), brands traditionally address singular lower-level goals and needs related to concrete product purchases. In so doing, they neglect the vast-

ness of other value creation opportunities within the broader context of the need category. These need categories are circumscribed by consumers' higher-level goals. Because BPPs bring together numerous stakeholders (e.g., other brands, consumers, content providers) with distinct offerings (e.g., products, peer advice, content), they are able to address these higher-level goals and to engage consumers continuously. And because higher-level goals are never fully attained, BPPs offer brands a source of virtually 'endless' value creation.

Consequently, BPPs become constant companions, gradually claiming larger parts of consumers' activities and being integrated more deeply into their daily lives. Figure 1 (lower part) shows that UA's BPP delivers value along the way to various goals within the context of an active and healthy life. However, the dashed lines, which represent interactions not yet covered by the BPP, also indicate that UA has ample potential to further expand its occupation of the need category.

To date, BPPs are especially prominent in the fitness sector. Nonetheless, the concept can be extended to any sector and brand that is able to a) identify need categories and higher-level consumer goals related to their offering and b) occupy these need categories by assisting consumers in the pursuit of their higher-level goals. Thus, the Mercedes Me platform addresses consumers' goal of being environmentally conscious by teaching them to drive in a more sustainable manner. And the clothing brand Patagonia provides opportunities to engage in voluntary community work through its Action Works platform, addressing the higher-level goal of being a valuable part of one's community.

Platform Structures Make BPPs' Value Creation Economically Viable

Creating deep consumer relationships while turning a profit is challenging, as brand-owned activities and infrastructure naturally incur costs. BPPs circumvent this issue by leveraging a platform architecture in which the brand is not the sole creator of consumer value but assumes the role of a value orchestrator, enabling and encouraging interactions between platform participants. This setup drives down marginal costs dramatically. Thus, BPPs borrow from and extend transaction-based platforms such as Amazon, Uber, or Airbnb.

These platforms, representing the 'first wave' of digital platforms, act as intermediaries between two market sides (Rochet & Tirole, 2003). Fueled by direct and indirect network effects (Katz & Shapiro, 1994), they are able to deliver

unprecedented transactional value by 1) offering an extremely broad assortment, 2) matching supply and demand, 3) providing transparency, and 4) a convenient fulfillment. The result is an unparalleled efficiency of transactions.

BPPs are representatives of the 'second wave' of digital platforms. Instead of enabling efficient transactions, they enable the highly efficient joint creation of value by involving all platform participants in the value creation process (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016, 2018).

BPPs Create four Distinct Types of Value through Interactions

From the occupation of need categories and the interaction orientation follows that BPPs deliver four types of value to consumers: 1) customization of the core offering, 2) social interactions, 3) assisting consumers in self-actualization, and 4) providing hedonic experiences.

Customization value: Through co-creation, consumers can tailor attributes of the core offering to match their unique requirements and personalize their experiences (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In doing so, consumers reap psychological benefits (O'Hern & Rindfleisch, 2010) and create value for themselves as well as for others by developing new offerings (Etgar, 2008; Nambisan, 2002) and publishing user-generated content (UGC; e.g., a user-uploaded running track). UGC represents an important source of value (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009) and allows platforms to offer a large variety of content and customized services, which previously was only possible at high costs (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016).

Social value: Social value relates to value derived from consumers' interactions with other platform participants. Consumers enjoy expressing a unique self-image and building status and reputation within a community (Nambisan & Baron, 2009) by sharing experiences, knowledge, and personal beliefs (Marder, Joinson, Shankar, & Thirlaway, 2016; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). Interactions also create a sense of belonging and social identity (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Through crowd collaboration consumers can also create value for the BPP, for instance, by jointly organizing a running group.

Self-actualization value: Consumers have a fundamental and never-satisfied urge to self-actualize, to live up to their full potential (Maslow, 1943, p. 93). The urge pertains to acquiring knowledge, excellence and accomplishment (Holbrook, 1999; Xie, Bagozzi, & Troye, 2008). This is also mirrored in today's self-quantification and self-improve-

Management Summary

Branded Product Platforms (BPPs) use platform structures and new technologies to interact with consumers on an ongoing basis, which bears the potential to build intimate and perpetuated relationships. BPPs connect numerous platform participants, thereby transforming the brand into an orchestrator of distinct value types: customization value, social value, self-actualization value, and hedonic value. Brands leverage BPPs to not only sell single products, but occupy entire need categories (e.g., fitness or gardening) and address consumers' life goals. They are thus a means to extend the traditional customer journey indefinitely, long before, after, and even independent of a purchase.

ment trends fueled by connected devices that track consumers' every move (Kelly, 2016; Wolf, 2010). BPPs are able to provide educational content, performance quantification, and personalized advice—increasingly powered by AI—which collectively assist consumers in their pursuit of self-actualization.

Hedonic value: Finally, BPPs foster hedonic value creation, which may come in the form of content provided for pleasure or escapism (Nambisan & Baron, 2009). Hedonic experiences are traditionally less intense online than offline (Verhoef et al., 2009). However, more powerful devices and new technologies are enabling increasingly engaging digital experiences through gamification elements (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019) as well as virtual and augmented reality (Reinartz, Wiegand, & Imschloss, 2019).

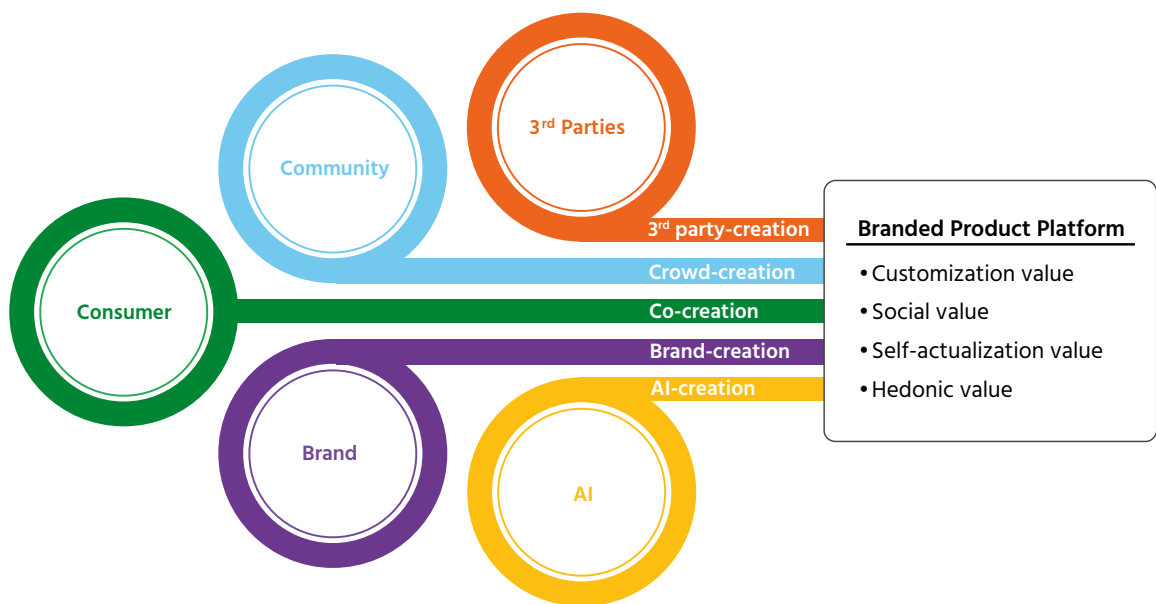
Value creation on BPPs is no longer a unidirectional flow from brand to consumer, but multidirectional, multilateral, interactive, and continuous (Figure 2). Accordingly, seamless integration of actors into the BPP is critical. This is achieved through advances in system integration and digitization of information which allow linking platform participants via standardized interfaces (APIs). Moreover, increasingly sophisticated and easy-to-use co-creation and crowd

collaboration systems enable the ever-deeper integration of consumers in the value creation process. As a result, consumers may even become (semi-) professional product and service providers for the BPP (Eckhardt, Houston, Jiang, Lambertson, Rindfleisch, & Zervas, 2019).

Besides the integration of consumers and 3rd parties, BPPs increasingly feature AI that contributes to the efficient creation of value. Although the AI is usually generated by the brand, it needs to be considered as a distinct entity due to its autonomy (Novak & Hoffman, 2019). The often passively transmitted data (via connected devices) fuels AI technologies, enabling them to autonomously initiate value creating interactions with consumers.

In summary, the unique interplay between stakeholders and technology allows BPPs to engage consumers based on their higher-level goals while being economically viable for all participants. This would not be possible outside of a platform architecture. Accordingly, content and services that otherwise would not exist at all or only at high costs can be generated on BPPs. They can even serve niche consumers and fringe groups usually underserved by brands. As a result, BPPs can substantially extend a brand's reach and relationship intensity.

Fig. 2: BPP Participants and Their Value Creation



Source: Own illustration.

Designing and Governing BPPs

As brands transform from value creators to value orchestrators, designing and governing the BPP becomes a major concern. A badly designed and governed BPP lacks meaningful interactions and may even give rise to harmful and exploitative behavior (Krishna, 2020), as seen in Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal.

From the platform literature, three fundamental 'hard' levers to design and govern a BPP emerge: 1) platform openness, 2) platform control, and 3) platform intermediation.

The degree of platform openness determines who is allowed on the BPP. A brand may restrict 3rd party access or only grant access to premium customers. While an open structure may seem beneficial for fostering network effects, studies show that it dampens platform participants' engagement in value co-creation (Boudreau, 2010). In addition, inviting 3rd party brands that offer substitutes (e.g., Nike in the case of UA) implies a substantial strategic shift and needs to be considered carefully.

Platform control determines the degree of control granted to participants over platform resources. A higher degree of control can foster participants' value creation efforts (e.g. user-written freeware for PCs) but it may also lead to pervasive outcomes that undermine the BPP's purpose (e.g. computer viruses). In addition, it may impede a brand's potential to reap revenues when control over monetization is ceded (Boudreau, 2010).

Platform intermediation determines the degree to which a BPP restricts and mediates interactions among participants. While unrestricted interactions may support creativity and innovativeness, they may also lead to increasingly chaotic, unpredictable, and even antisocial and fraudulent behaviors. Stronger platform intermediation can increase trust and lead to more reliable and efficient interactions (Perren & Kozinets, 2018). In addition, intermediation may be necessary for monetization, as participants may try to circumvent a platform to save on transaction fees (Wirtz, So, Mody, Liu, & Chun, 2019).

Besides these hard levers, a BPP can also employ soft levers to govern the platform. Behavioral engineering can be used to incentivize behavior (Bolton & Ockenfels, 2012). The car-sharing platform ShareNow, for example, rewards consumers that refuel a car with free credits. Incentives do not need to be monetary. Prior research on Airbnb shows, for example, that setting up a double-blind feedback process prompts users to write more accurate reviews (Fradkin, Grewal, & Holtz, 2018).

Main Propositions

1. The ongoing digitalization has provided brands with an interface to the consumer that enables interactions anytime and anywhere.
2. This paves the way for Branded Product Platforms (BPPs) that leverage this interface through platform structures and new technologies.
3. Through BPPs, brands become orchestrators of the joint value creation by all platform participants.
4. On BPPs this value creation relates to consumers' higher-level need categories and associated life goals.
5. The brand-consumer relationship thus evolves to become more profound, intimate, and perpetual as the BPP is embedded deeply into consumers' everyday life.

BPPs can also influence consumers through nudging (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), which includes mechanisms well known to marketers such as framing and anchoring, default options, and choice architecture (Johnson et al., 2012). Especially gamification elements such as scores, levels, leaderboards, and game-like experiences have been established as effective means to direct consumer behavior (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019). In the context of self-actualization, gamification can help consumers pursue their goals and build habits. The combination of ongoing self-quantification through connected devices and social comparison makes gamification a potent mechanism for BPPs.

Conclusion, Outlook, and Implications

BPPs carry great potential for brands to engage consumers in an intimate and perpetual relationship fueled by platform structures and network effects. The emerging four value types—customization, social, self-actualization, and hedonic value—are distinctive for BPPs and the reason consumers stay engaged and integrate BPPs deeply into their daily lives. They allow brands to continuously interact with consumers, gather large amounts of data, and open up new sources of revenue by occupying entire need categories. UA's BPP, for example, generates US\$ 136 million in revenues through

licenses, subscriptions, and advertising—without accounting for the indirect revenue effects that arise from improved brand relationships with its 40–50 million monthly active users (Under Armour, 2020).


Although the most elaborate and comprehensive BPPs to date are to be found in the fitness sector, this is not to say that other sectors may not use BPPs. Especially brands in markets with no or few BPPs may profit enormously from moving first and fully reaping the benefits of network effects. The health, food, and financial sectors are particularly ripe for BPPs due to related need categories and consumers' associated higher-level goals (i.e. living a healthy life, being financially stable) that are closely connected to brands' core offerings.

As described above, it is crucial that a brand a) identifies compelling higher-level consumer goals related to its offering and b) finds ways to assist consumers in the pursuit of these goals. Managers may find this kind of goals either closely connected to their offering (as in the case of UA) or address goals that are more loosely connected to their offering (as in the case of Patagonia). In the latter case, the goal must be strongly aligned with the brand positioning to be perceived as authentic and credible (Spiggle, Nguyen, & Caravella, 2012).

As more and more BPPs compete for the same consumers and 3rd party providers, late entrants will face considerable challenges. The very network effects that make platforms successful may favor a winner-takes-all outcome (Reinartz, Wiegand, & Wichmann, 2019). Hence, late movers, especially copycats of existing BPPs, will not be able to acquire the critical mass of participants and are destined to fail. For managers, different strategic options emerge: 1) move early to develop the market and profit from network effects, 2) deliver value above and beyond the established players, 3) carve out a niche (e.g. in the fitness sector by focusing on health outcomes instead of fitness outcomes), or 4) become a powerful platform ally by joining a BPP as a 3rd party (Reinartz, Wiegand, & Wichmann, 2019). The latter strategy may even function as a jumping-off point for a brand to eventually launch its own BPP.

Just as 'traditional' platform businesses have disrupted industries in the past decade, BPPs will fundamentally transform the conventional brand–consumer relationship. The role of brands and their successful management will evolve, too. Companies need to manage and align their focal brand and the branding of the BPP itself, similar to a retailer managing its store brand and private labels. In addition, brands need to measure and mitigate the effects of platform participants on its branding. Some 3rd parties or influential consumers may strongly affect the overall perception of the BPP (Swaminathan, Sorescu, Steenkamp, O'Guinn, & Schmitt,

2020). Thus, managers must decide how powerful they want participants to become. They can use governance mechanisms, like decreasing platform openness and increasing platform intermediation, to favor a stronger dominance of their own brand. Similarly, 3rd party brands in the market need to decide whether to join a BPP and what role they are willing and able to take on: that of mere platform suppliers or strong brands within the BPP.

BPPs imply a profound strategic and organizational shift from the classic 'pipeline' model of value creation towards the orchestration of a networked creation of value. As such, technological competencies become crucial for companies—but they are not sufficient. Competencies in psychology, sociology, and behavioral economics play a major role in the design and governance of BPPs. Ultimately, however, it is the long-term relationship between brand and consumers that is at the very heart of BPPs. Therefore, a strong brand with pronounced core values is vital for establishing and maintaining consumer trust. Even on this technology-dominated playing field, the CMO will continue to play a major role in leveraging new opportunities for networked value creation and composing the required interdisciplinary teams while ensuring alignment with the brand's core values. 

Lessons Learned

1. BPPs require managers to rethink established notions as brands are transformed from value creators into value orchestrators of novel value types (customization, social, self-actualization, and hedonic value).
2. To position the BPP, managers need to identify consumer-relevant need categories and life goals that are in line with their brand positioning.
3. BPPs require strategic decisions on platform openness, control, and intermediation (hard levers) and allow to tactically deploy behavioral engineering, nudging, and gamification (soft levers).
4. Early movers can profit from network effects, late movers will need to deliver value above and beyond, carve out a niche, or join existing BPPs to profit from their established consumer base.
5. The successful design and governance of BPPs requires multidisciplinary teams led by a CMO that ensures consistency with the brand positioning.

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