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FRESH PERSPECTIVES ON CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

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Purpose – The purpose is to provide directions for future research on: (1) broadening the role of customers in customer experience; (2) taking a practice-based approach to customer experience; and (3) recognizing the holistic, dynamic nature of customer experience across all touch points and over time.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach is conceptual identifying current gaps in research on customer experience.

Findings – The findings include a set of research questions and research agenda for future research on customer experience.

Originality/value – This research suggests fresh perspectives for understanding the customer experience which can inspire future research and advance theory and managerial practice.

Keywords: Customer experience, customer role, holistic, dynamic, practice based approach

Paper type: Conceptual

Introduction

Customer experience has become a key focus of both contemporary service research and management practice. Indeed, creating a meaningful customer experience is considered pivotal for achieving competitive advantage and satisfied customers (Bolton *et al.*, 2014; Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). Whilst much of the research on customer experience has focused on hedonic consumption emphasizing the individuals' "extraordinary", "critical" or "peak" experiences (e.g. Friman *et al.*, 2001; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Schouten *et al.*, 2007), customer experience is increasingly recognized in more mundane situations and across a range of contexts, such as in business-to-business settings (Klaus, 2014), and with users of public services (Hardyman *et al.*, 2015; Radnor and Johnston, 2013; Olsson *et al.*, 2013).

There are different ways to view the "customer" in the customer experience. For example, they may be considered as a "consumer", "user", "participant", "co-creator" (Bolton *et al.*, 2014), "guest" or "actor" (Lusch, 2011). A central notion in contemporary thinking is that customer experiences are not solely delivered by organizations for customers. Rather, the experience itself is inexorably linked with the value obtained as perceived by the individuals involved (Helkkula *et al.*, 2012). Customer experiences are uniquely and contextually interpreted, and they emerge whether an organization chooses to recognize and influence the experience or not (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). The question is are organizations ready to face this challenge?

Customer experience conceptualization

Customer experience research remains fragmented with still relatively little known about the phenomenon. Most customer experience knowledge is derived from practitioner-oriented journals or management books (Holbrook, 2007; Verhoef *et al.*, 2009), for example, Rawson *et al.* (2013). Consequently, the focus is largely on managerial actions and outcomes rather than on theories underlying the antecedents and consequences of customer experience.

Customer experience is commonly defined as holistic in nature, involving the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to any direct or indirect contact with the service provider, brand, or product, across multiple touch points during the entire customer journey (e.g. Bolton *et al.* 2014; Meyer and Schwager, 2007). In other words, customer experience is created not only by elements that the service provider can control (e.g. service interface, atmosphere, assortment, price), but also by elements outside of their control, such as the influence of other customers or devices like smart phones that customers chose to use in various situations.

Service marketing and management scholars have traditionally studied customer experience in terms of two main domains: (1) moments of truth (Normann, 2001); and (2) service blueprinting (Bitner *et al.*, 2008; Flieb and Kleinaltenkamp, 2004; Shostack, 1984). These approaches are based on a dyadic, unidirectional view that the organization provides experiences for the customer, with the customer being essentially passive. Despite acknowledgement that the customer experience emerges throughout the process of the customer journey, research has tended to take a static view or snapshot view with one survey at one point in time. This is problematic since it builds on the respondents' memory of a process or a transaction which may not always be a correct representation of the actual occurrence (Kristensson *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, the focus has been largely from the organization's perspective and not from that of the customer.

We take a different perspective. We argue that to advance customer experience research and practice, a static, dyadic, organization-centric perspective is no longer adequate. Accordingly, our article raises sets of research questions to advance customer experience knowledge by highlighting the opportunities afforded by taking a dynamic, multi-actor-centric perspective. Specifically, we highlight three key domains of our perspective: (1) broadening the role of customers in customer experience; (2) taking a practice-based

approach to customer experience; and (3) recognizing the holistic, dynamic nature of customer experience across all touch points and over time. The research agenda related to these domains is summarized in Table 1.

---- Insert Table 1 about here -----

Broadening customer role

In today's interconnected world, the boundaries between customers, organizations, and other suppliers are becoming blurred (Achrol and Kotler, 2012). Customers can no longer be regarded as merely passive recipients of what an organization does for or to them, but as co-creators and ultimate determiners of value (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Today's customers increasingly provide ideas for service innovations, design, co-produce and deliver customer experiences (Witell *et al.*, 2014), significantly influence other customers' decisions (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2015), and even shape organizations' internal processes (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014).

One of the main challenges facing organizations is how to manage customers commencing a service journey given that customers differ in their role preferences, abilities and resources. For example, customer roles can vary from synthesizing a wide range of resources, engaging with many individual stakeholders in the network, to complying with a service provider's requests (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, customer experience depends on what a customer can and is willing to do and how much an organization allows the customers to actually do themselves. The latter is a matter of governance and who has control in different situations. This has significant implications for both research and practice and hence we propose the following to advance our understanding of the customers' new broadened role in customer experiences.

One under-researched area of the broadened role relates to what resources customers can and do bring to co-produce the service. Such knowledge can assist organizations in

determining the necessary resources that may be required to achieve a successful customer experience. Future research could therefore examine the ability and willingness of customers to expand their role in co-creating experiences. Service providers have traditionally provided the expertise to design service experiences (Ulrich and Eppinger, 2008) as their investment in skills acquisition, banks of technical, intellectual and procedural knowledge (Amabile, 1998) and learning over time equips them to do so. Although customers may struggle to move beyond everyday practices and routines to envisage and realize novel or broadened approaches to co-produce given the right tools they may be encouraged to do so (Kristensson *et al.*, 2004).

We still know very little about the levels and types of customer knowledge and skills associated with broadened and enhanced customer practices in service experiences. Also, even if a customer can contribute to the production process they may not be willing to do so, thinking that it is not their job. This triggers interesting questions, such as, which consumer characteristics are more commensurate with experience-broadening behaviors than others? (see Table 1). Do some consumers exhibit a greater propensity to acquire prerequisite skills than others? Which extrinsic and intrinsic motives drive engagement and behavior designed to improve customers' experiences? Whilst such understanding is emergent in co-creation research (Füller *et al.*, 2010), studies which investigate customers' willingness to broaden their role in service experiences would be insightful. Moreover, we suggest researchers should explore the boundaries of customers' role and influence in contexts in which they did not choose to be part of the experience, such as is the case of a prisoner, in many cases a patient or during travel.

Taking a practice-based approach

We argue that as customers are changing their roles and behaviors, they exercise greater influence on the experience formation of not only themselves but also other customers,

stakeholders, and service providers, which in turn warrants further research (e.g. van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). We posit service experiences as co-created by customers *with* other actors at the service encounter and in their own service ecosystems (e.g. Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015; McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2015). The recognition that customers can collectively shape each other's experiences has been paralleled in other fields such as consumer culture theory (CCT) (e.g. Schau *et al.*, 2009) and Service Dominant (S-D) Logic (e.g. McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, we need to move away from a dyadic, firm-to-customer perspective to a broader view that potentially includes multiple actors (Frow *et al.*, 2014).

Accordingly, we propose a practice-based approach to study customer experience from a broader, more dynamic, multi-party perspective. This approach focuses on what customers do and say, highlighting that individuals influence other individuals, who in turn are influenced by others in an evolving ecosystem (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2015). By focusing on customers' activities and interactions with others, shared practices evolve over time. A practice-based approach emphasizes the importance of activities and the different ways individuals engage with others. This indicates that customers perceive value based upon their personal viewpoint (possibly shaped by practices), driving their engagement and interaction choices. But to what extent does the shared practice-approach apply in terms of how customers perceive their experiences? If shared practices evolve over time, in what ways can practices be influenced by a service provider? Do practices vary depending on the customer's role, personality, goals, or current emotions, as indicated in our proposition about the customers' broadening role in creating experiences? An interesting future research question therefore is "How can we combine this new broadened role and the practice-based approach to answer the challenges of holistic customer experience management?"

Holistic and dynamic: across all touch points over time

Recent research indicates that customer experience is a dynamic phenomenon, emerging during various phases of the customer journey, including for example, search, purchase, consumption, and after-sale encounters, typically involving multiple channels and multiple touch points. Customers have contacts with service providers with different purposes and goals to fulfill and we know very little about how this forms a process. In order to gain a more comprehensive view of the customer experience we need to deeply understand *all* direct and indirect interactions customers have with the service provider, service or the brand at various touch points over time (Bolton *et al.*, 2014). But we go further, we argue for the need to explore the *level* of emotional attachment or investment the customer has in the customer experience process (e.g. a customer is likely to have a lower level of emotional attachment purchasing fast food compared to having medical treatment).

To gain such a holistic understanding, service providers need to understand that customers' perceptions and evaluations of their experiences change over time. Organizations need to take a long term approach gathering longitudinal information during the customer experience. This highlights the need to undertake research in order to understand what actions resonate well with their customers at the various touch points throughout all interactions. To obtain a more complete view of the customer's experience, organizations should capture and analyze data on the customer's practices and interactions across channels. By doing this, organizations can gain insights to facilitate meaningful and personalized consumer experiences. Customer data is an asset that needs to be managed like any other asset in a systematic way. This means that service providers should set up systematic multi-methods to capture data across multiple channels and touch points including emotions throughout the customer experience. This constitutes a major challenge for companies today; customer data is generally not organized this way.

We propose two avenues for future research here. Firstly, detailed micro-level investigations of the entire customer journey, across all channels are called for. Secondly, research should examine how customer experience develops over time. To advance understanding of the dynamics of the phenomenon, researchers could study how experiences along the service life cycle change as the service matures, or as the customer gains experience with the service. Extant research is relatively silent on what influences variability of the customer experience over time. To address such questions, we argue that longitudinal research designs are needed. Longitudinal research can be conducted in three ways: (1) retrospectively, like a detective story, reconstructing the journey and events, unravelling the motives, means and opportunities; (2) in real time (present) through long term ethnographic observations of flows of events and interactions; and (3) through extrapolations of the future (such as simulation, modelling techniques). Such methods are not without major constraints, particularly high costs, research time, difficulties in evaluation and weak demonstration of validity. However, alternative valuable longitudinal techniques, which examine processes holistically and over time, exist and are emergent in the services domain (Perks *et al.*, 2012). We recommend that researchers seek out such techniques, such as sequence analysis, which offer rigorous approaches to the systematic tracking and analysis of detailed activities and interactions over time (Perks and Roberts, 2013). Sequence analysis, for example, breaks down broad patterns of overall processes into sequences of activities or events that lead to specific outcomes. New technology, such as eye-tracking or built in trackers, enables researchers to correctly capture and interpret these sequences (Wästlund *et al.*, 2015). Such techniques could be of great value to researchers unravelling the depth and complexity of customer experiences, the multiplicity, breadth and timing of interactions with multiple parties in the customer journey, and in tracking detailed touch points over time.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of taking a multi-party co-created view of customer experiences, arguing that service providers need to understand that customer practices are broadening in scope and that the customer experience goes beyond the traditional firm-to-customer dyadic conceptualization. Fresh perspectives for understanding the customer experience that can inspire future research and advance managerial practice are outlined. Table 1 provides a list of research questions around the three key promising directions for future research namely: (1) broadening customer role; (2) taking a practice-based approach; and (3) better understanding the dynamic holistic nature of customer experience. We challenge researchers and practitioners to think differently about the customer experience adjusting their practices and research methods to take into account these three areas which hold great potential to shape the next evolutionary stage in consumer experience research and practice.

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Table 1 Promising research domains for customer experience: A research agenda

1. Broadening customer role a. What resources do customers bring to the service experience? Identify categories of resources, skills and capabilities that customers bring to the experience. b. What motivates customers to take a broadened role? c. When should companies allow customers to have control? d. Are there certain demographic and personality traits associated with willingness to take a broadened customer role? e. What are the key barriers and costs that prevent customers from taking on different roles in the customer experience? f. Under what circumstances are customers willing/not willing to bring resources? g. What does an organization need to bring to the experience to fill any gaps between resources that customers are willing and able to bring, and what is needed for the customer experience to be optimized? h. What is the experience of the reluctant customer such as patients and prisoners? How do these reluctant customers view their role?
2. Taking a practice-based approach a. In what ways can frontline employees enhance/shape the customer experience? b. What are the respective roles of the various actors in the customer experience? c. How do practices vary depending on the roles, personality and goals of each actor in the customer experience? d. How do the shared practices of actors change over time? e. What specific activities and interactions enhance customer experiences? f. Are some activities more effortful and hence more difficult than other activities for various actors to carry out? If so, are the more effortful activities more likely to result in enhanced outcomes?
3. Holistic and dynamic: across all touch points over time a. How can encounter experiences be optimized at the various touch points in the customer journey? b. What are the patterns of sequences of interactions which characterize customer experiences? c. What is the level of emotional attachment of customers with the customer experience at each touch point? d. How does level of emotional attachment change over time? e. How do we develop new metrics and employ rigorous analytical methods to measure the customer experience across the touch points and over time? How best can customer experience information be collected and managed across touch points and over time? f. How can qualitative and quantitative measures of the customer experience be effectively combined?

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