



Self-service delight: Exploring the hedonic aspects of self-service



Joel E. Collier^{a,*}, Donald C. Barnes^{b,1}

^a Mississippi State University, Department of Marketing, Quantitative Analysis and Business Law, College of Business and Industry, Mississippi State, MS 39762, United States

^b Cameron School of Business, University of North Carolina–Wilmington, Wilmington, NC 24803, United States

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ABSTRACT

A majority of the previous self-service research has been completed in a utilitarian environment where concepts such as efficiency reign supreme. In a hedonic oriented self-service, efficiency may not be the only goal. In response to this question, the current research evaluates how task uncertainty, servicescape, perceived control and perceived time pressure impact efficiency and fun. The latter constructs are then linked directly to customer delight. Results indicate that in a hedonic oriented self-service environment fun alone is a significant predictor of customer delight. Managerial implications stemming from the empirical findings are discussed along with directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

For many customers, the reason to choose a self-service option is based around the perceived benefits of performing the transaction themselves. One of the prominent benefits noted by customers is that self-service allows customers to have greater efficiency in a transaction (Collier & Kimes, 2013; Dabholkar, Bobbitt, & Lee, 2003). Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005) found that one of the primary reasons customers wanted to forego a full service option and purchase online was efficiency. As well, Oh, Jeong, and Baloglu (2013) found that some customers prefer self-service because it requires little to no interaction with others further highlighting the efficiency of a transaction.

While efficiency appears to be a recurring theme in self-service research, the one aspect overlooked within many of these studies is that the focus is solely on the utilitarian aspects of a service experience. With applications such as grocery store self-checkouts, customers have already completed their browsing/shopping experience and at this point are ready to leave the store with their purchases as quick as possible. Similarly, bill payment kiosks, ticket travel check-ins, and ATMs are simplistically designed to complete a task with as few “clicks/touches” as possible and any delays in the experience are seen as a negative. Thus, an interesting question that remains is what happens when self-service is infused into a hedonic experience? Is efficiency equally important in a hedonic self-service context?

Insight into these questions can be gained by evaluating previous research in hedonic services. For example, in a hedonic context, taking a break or experiencing delays can actually increase the pleasure or perceived quality the customer experiences (Giebelhausen, Robinson, & Cronin, 2011; Nelson & Meyvis, 2008). Similarly, pressuring customers to complete a transaction quickly can have a negative influence on the enjoyment of an experience (Kim & Kim, 2008). From a shopping perspective, the hedonic components of an experience are one of the primary influences that promote prolonged interaction (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008). As Heijden (2004) states: the hedonic value of an experience is the self-fulfilling benefit derived from the process where the utilitarian value of an experience is the instrumental benefit the process provides to the user. Hence, it appears that efficiency may be essential in some environments but not in others.

Taking a different perspective than previous self-service studies, we explore the influences of self-service when the focus is on the hedonic compared to the utilitarian elements of a service experience. Specifically, we examine how constructs such as perceived time pressure and the servicescape influence customers' enjoyment of an experience. Since hedonic-oriented services are focused on encouraging a longer interaction, we also explore the construct of task uncertainty. Finally, even with a hedonic self-service setting, there is still a utilitarian component that cannot be ignored, and subsequently, we explore the influence of fun and efficiency in a hedonic setting and how these concepts ultimately impact evaluations such as delight.

The goal of this research is to increase the managerial understanding of self-service operations when the focus is on the hedonic value of an experience. By understanding the unique challenges of a hedonic self-

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 662 325 0410; fax: +1 662 325 7012.

E-mail addresses: jcollier@cobilan.msstate.edu (J.E. Collier), barnesd@uncw.edu (D.C. Barnes).

¹ Tel.: +1 910 962 3966; fax: +1 910 962 7983.

service setting, management can accurately design and implement an experience that caters to the wants and needs of customers beyond the simple utility of a transaction. With the emphasis on extending compared to minimizing a service experience, management must be aware of how a self-service operation needs to be altered to promote an enjoyable experience.

2. Theoretical foundation

From a theoretical perspective, one of the dominant theories utilized in evaluating self-service has been the theory of resource matching (Anand & Sternthal, 1990). The reason for its repetitive use (Collier & Kimes, 2013; Zhu, Nakata, Sivakumar, & Grewal, 2007) is that its central focus is on efficiency. That is, the theory states that customers have a limited amount of resources to complete a task, and when a given task exceeds these resources, efficiency is diminished (Anand & Sternthal, 1990). This theory is appropriate in a utilitarian environment where efficiency is the key goal. Unfortunately, this theory may be inept to account for the dynamic influences in a hedonic-based self-service where efficiency may not be paramount.

In contrast to the focus on efficiency of resource matching theory, the theory of consumption values provides a more global understanding of why customers may choose to utilize self-service in a hedonic environment. This theory states that customer choice is a function of five consumption values and that these values can have a differential influence depending on the situation (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991). The five values are functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional. Functional value refers to the “perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s capacity for functional, utilitarian, or physical performance” (p.160). Social value refers to the “perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s association with one or more specific social groups” (p.161). Emotional value refers to the “perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s capacity to arouse feelings or affective states” (p.161). Epistemic value refers to the “perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s capacity to arouse curiosity, provide novelty, and/or satisfy a desire for knowledge” (p.162). Finally, conditional value refers to the “perceived utility acquired by an alternative as the results of a specific situation or set of circumstances facing the choice maker” (p.162).

It is expected that with hedonic-based self-services, not only will utilitarian value influence the customer, but also social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional values will impact the customer. For example, in a hedonic-based self-service such self-serve frozen yogurt, customers could experience the following: quenching hunger (functional need), socializing with friends (social need), revisiting memories of previous frozen yogurt outings (emotional), challenging themselves to use a different combination of toppings (epistemic value), and finally enjoying eating the desert in the summer (conditional value). Unlike other theories, the theory of consumption values provides an ideal framework to capture the multiple desires of a customer in a hedonic setting.

3. Conceptual framework

To better understand a hedonic-based self-service environment, the authors formed a conceptual model based on existing literature. The model initially examines the importance of two constructs: task uncertainty and servicescape and their respective impact on perceived control and perceived time pressure. The latter variables were specifically chosen because a hedonic service often promotes customers to extend a transaction compared to a utilitarian service focused on speed. The model next looks at the impact of perceived control and perceived time pressure on efficiency and fun. These variables were chosen as they reflect the difference between utilitarian and hedonic focused services respectively. Finally, we evaluate the impact of efficiency and fun on customer delight. This is an important aspect in the model as customer delight has been shown as a powerful predictor of customer

behavior (word of mouth, loyalty, etc.) in comparison with often used metrics such as satisfaction (Arnold, Reynolds, Ponder, & Lueg, 2005; Barnes, Beauchamp, & Webster, 2010; Finn, 2012). To see the details of our conceptual model along with the proposed hypothesized relationships, see Fig. 1. Next, we briefly discuss the importance of the constructs chosen for this study.

3.1. Task uncertainty

Task uncertainty is defined as the difference between the amount of information required to perform a task and the amount of information already possessed by a customer (Galbraith, 1977). With many self-service functions, formal instructions are rarely given and the customer is expected to way-find through the process. The lack of instructions may not be crucial in the utilitarian environment where simplicity is usually designed into the process. However, in the hedonic context, where the focus can be on longer and more complex interactions, higher task uncertainty can lead to higher variability and unpredictability. This can result in the customer perceiving a lack of control in the process. Unfortunately, previous research has shown that task uncertainty can lead to failures in achieving an intended objective (Tatikonda & Rosenthal, 2000). Similarly, Shockley, Roth, and Fredendall’s (2011) retail study found that a poor self-service design enhanced task uncertainty where customers needed more information to control the service process independent of employee involvement. Subsequently, if the uncertainty of a task is high, customers’ lack of awareness of what to do, or what step comes next can diminish feelings of control in the self-service experience. Thus,

Hypothesis 1. Task uncertainty will have a negative relationship with customers’ perceived control in the service process

Perceived time pressure occurs when the amount of time needed to accomplish a task approaches or exceeds the perceived time available (Strombeck & Wakefield, 2008). It is expected that task uncertainty will influence perceived time pressure to complete a transaction. Supporting this idea, Dabholkar et al.’s (2003) qualitative self-service study of nonusers noted that the unfamiliarity of the checkout process produced outcomes such as perceived time pressure. As well, Doronina (1995) found that customers’ uncertainty and anxiety in using technology led them to reduce the amount of time in an experience. As would be expected, these uncomfortable feelings appear to manifest in felt time pressure. Thus,

Hypothesis 2. Task uncertainty will have a positive relationship with customers’ perceived time pressure

3.2. Servicescape

Servicescape is defined as the physical surroundings that are present during a service experience (Bitner, 1992). Previous research has noted that the servicescape can influence the cognitive, emotional, and social needs of customers to approach or avoid a service (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011). In this research, we examine how the servicescape of a hedonic self-service experience influences customers’ feelings of control. In Bitner’s (1992) study on servicescapes, she notes that the environment of the service can influence customers’ feelings of control which subsequently impact feelings of pleasure. Similarly, Hui and Bateson (1991) found that the customer density of the servicescape influenced feelings of control. From a self-service perspective, if the servicescape reduces potential stressors and allows for customers to clearly see the steps needed in the service process, a greater sense of control will exist. Thus,

Hypothesis 3. A conducive servicescape will have a positive relationship with customers’ perceived control in the service process

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