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Service encounters, experiences and the customer journey: Defining the field and a call to expand our lens

Clay M. Voorhees^a, Paul W. Fombelle^b, Yany Gregoire^c, Sterling Bone^d, Anders Gustafsson^{e,*}, Rui Sousa^f, Travis Walkowiak^g

^a Michigan State University, Eli Broad College of Business, East Lansing, MI 48824, United States

^b Northeastern University, D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Boston, MA 02115, United States

^c HEC Montreal, Montréal, (Québec) H3T 2A7, Canada

^d Utah State University, John M. Huntsman School of Business, Logan, UT 84322, United States

^e CTF, Service Research Center, Karlstad Business School, Karlstad University, SE-651 88 Karlstad, Sweden

^f Catholic University of Portugal (Porto), Rua Diogo Botelho, 1327, Portugal

^g Michigan State University, Eli Broad College of Business, East Lansing, MI 48824, United States

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ABSTRACT

Service researchers have emphasized the importance of studying the service experience, which encompasses multiple service encounters. Although the reflection on a series of service encounters has increased, the scope of research in this space remains narrow. Service research has traditionally concentrated on understanding, measuring and optimizing the core service delivery. While this focused lens has generated extraordinary knowledge and moved service research and practice forward, it has also resulted in a narrowly focused research field. The authors present a framework to guide comprehensive service experience research. Broadly, they define (1) *pre-core service encounter*, (2) *core service encounter*, and (3) *post-core service encounter* as distinct periods within a service experience. Further, they review the literature and put forward important research questions to be addressed within and across these periods. Finally, they argue that researchers need to consider simultaneously all periods of the service experience to make valuable contributions to the literature.

1. Introduction

From a service research perspective, relationships are built from a series of encounters with a firm (Voorhees, Fombelle, Allen, Bone, & Aach, 2014), and top managers today are expanding their strategies to design and manage the entire process the customer goes through to have a good experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). It is during this full series of encounters that customers make judgments about the firm's quality, and each encounter contributes to customers' overall satisfaction and willingness to continue the relationship (Bitner, 1990; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Bitner & Wang, 2014; Bolton & Drew, 1992; Woodside, Frey, & Daly, 1989). However, the focus of service research for the past three decades has often been on understanding, measuring and optimizing the core service delivery and ensuring that the moments when the customer is “in the factory” are perceived as being excellent. But what happens leading up to the core and after the core has received less attention.

We argue that this narrowed focus on the core service delivery has caused service researchers and managers not fully to recognize evolving

customer needs for a holistic service experience, which spans all potential service encounters (or touchpoints) with the firm. In this absence, service scholars may be overlooking opportunities to enhance the service experience; and, as a result, our research discipline runs the risk of painting an incomplete picture of the service experience. By taking a holistic view of the customer experience (pre-core-post), firms may be able to strengthen relationships with their most valuable customers and, in turn, increase customer retention, positive word-of-mouth and profitability.

For example, Tomorrowland—a festival of dance music in Belgium—is an organization fully embracing a holistic view of customer experience. Compared to most music festivals that last only a few days, Tomorrowland generates a year-long experience that climaxes around two weekends of shows presented in July. Tomorrowland has created a community—called People of Tomorrow—which is very active on social media. The managers make sure to provide constant materials to their community twelve months per year by providing relevant music, videos and information. The festival organizes many pre-core activities (e.g., a variety of traveling and accommodation

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: anders.gustafsson@kau.se (A. Gustafsson).

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packages, opportunities of co-traveling, etc.) and post-core activities (e.g., a detox day, an “after-festival” movie, etc.) so that the managers can connect with their customers before and after the festival.

Consistent with the Tomorrowland example, recent research conceptualized customer experience “as a customer’s journey with a firm over time during the purchase cycle across multiple touchpoints” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 6). Thus, to truly understand how service firms can build and maintain lasting relationships, managers and researchers alike must not focus solely on the core service provision. Other authors have also recently called for research on the enhancement of service experiences (Gustafsson et al., 2015; Ostrom et al., 2015) and an inclusive view of all touchpoints within a service experience (Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, & Tse, 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Although this prior work has been foundational for service marketing, these previous reviews stop short of providing a critical review of research outside the lens of the core service encounter. A framework that focuses on the *integration* of the pre-core, core and post-core service encounters is still needed.

The current article strives to address this gap by focusing on reviewing and expanding the definitions of service encounter, by giving more attention to the “pre-core” and “post-core” periods, by discussing the “interdependencies” between the three encounter periods, and by highlighting the importance of strategically investing resources across the three encounter periods. In doing so, we hope to provide a framework that can play a role in launching another wave of service research that focuses on the linkage between the three encounter periods. To accomplish this, we have organized the article into three sections. First, we define and differentiate *service encounters* and *service experiences*, such that previous conceptualizations are reconciled with those of the newly-defined time periods. In this section, we define *pre-core service encounter*, *core service encounter* and *post-core service encounter* as the three distinct periods that make up a service experience. Second, we present a literature review and a research agenda for each type of service encounter. Third, we highlight the importance for firms to redistribute their resources across the three encounter periods and not to focus strictly on the core service encounter. In this last section, we discuss other potential models in which more emphasis is given to “pre-core” and “post-core” periods, depending on the competitive situation of a firm.

2. Service encounters versus the service experience

There has been inconsistency in the terminology used to refer to customer-firm or customer-employee interactions in service contexts. In light of the need for a comprehensive service experience framework, especially problematic is the interchangeable use of the terms “*service encounter*” and “*service experience*.” To suggest a specific protocol regarding the future use of these terms, we consider a recent take on their conceptualizations, and adapt the definitions of *service encounter* and *service experience* accordingly. In their review of the literature on service encounters and service experiences, Bitner and Wang (2014) illuminate the distinction and relationship between the terms. The distinction essentially lies in the discreteness of service encounters (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994) and the continuous nature of a service experience. In presenting a broadened framework for service experience research, we adhere to this distinction and extend the conceptualization of each term to account for the newly-defined pre-core, core, and post-core service encounter periods within a service experience.

In line with Bitner and Wang (2014), we define *service encounter* as any discrete interaction between the customer and the service provider relevant to a core service offering, including the interaction involving provision of the core service offering itself. This definition encompasses pre- and post-core encounters as well as those built into the core service provision as “moments of truth” that influence cumulative customer outcomes. Encounters have many forms and can be face-to-face in an actual service setting or online; they can also be over the phone,

through the mail or even by catalogue (Bitner, Brown, & Meuter, 2000). Moments of truth are described as critical encounters between customers and firms that significantly impact customers’ impressions of the firm and consumption (Beaujean, Davidson, & Madge, 2006; Bitner & Wang, 2014; Löfgren, 2005). While each service encounter is discrete, an element of customer impressions and satisfaction with the service provider is cumulative. Therefore, spillover of these outcomes from earlier service encounters accentuates the importance of a well-defined view of the overall service experience. The touchpoints are a service provider’s way to facilitate the service encounter and create interactions with customers; for instance, they can be online platforms, physical environments or catalogues.

Thus, we define *service experience* as the period during which all service encounters relevant to a core service offering may occur. This concept comprises pre- and post-core encounters, as well as the encounters built into the core service provision as “moments of truth” that influence customer outcomes. This conceptualization widens the lens through which we view service experience by highlighting the pre-core, core and post-core service encounter periods. These distinct periods also provide an approach to organizing extant and future research on service experience. Indeed, this broadened view facilitates research not only on individual service encounters within a single period, but also on the dynamics of customer experience across these periods. Fig. 1 provides a graphical overview of the relationships between various service encounters and the service experience. Next, we elaborate on the distinct features of the core, pre-core and post-core encounters.

There are other researchers that have found it meaningful to point out the presence of different phases in the consumption process. Alderson (1965) makes the distinction between “sort” and “transformation.” The sort phase entails bringing resources to a place (raw material and infrastructure) and the transformation phase adds form, space and time utilities. The chain of sorts and transformations can be very long. In turn, Grönroos (1998) argues that consumption of a service is a process consumption rather than an outcome consumption, where a consumer or user perceives the service production process as part of the service consumption. Moeller (2008) distinguishes among the following phases: facilities, transformations and usage. Similarly, Edvardsson and Olson (2006) subdivide the service into three dimensions: prerequisites for the service, process and outcome. The prerequisites refer to the infrastructure for the service and the outcome. Further, from a more resource perspective, Fliess and Kleinaltenkamp (2004) separate the periods into potential, process and outcome. Although these approaches are related to ours, we suggest a different conceptualization to capture the different aspects of an experience.

The *core service encounter period* is defined as the time interval during which the primary service offering is provided to the customer. The primary service fulfils a foundational customer need, which is the focal motivation that leads customers to engage with the service provider. This period—often referred to as the moment in which the customer is “in the factory”—has been researched extensively, with the literature investigating the core interactions between customers and employees, other customers, technologies (e.g., Bitner et al., 2000), and the service environment (e.g., Bitner, 1992). For example, this stage includes activities like delivering a lecture, receiving an annual physical from a doctor, staying at a hotel, or having a meal at restaurant. While previous research has suggested the importance of encounters throughout the service experience, including the periods outside of the core service encounter (Bitner, 1995), there is less research that formally examines the encounters before and after the core service encounter (see Lemon and Verhoef (2016) for a recent exception). Table 1 provides a review of several studies that provide a knowledge base for managing core encounters. In contrast with the core service encounter period, the function and purposes of the pre-core and post-core service encounters exist mainly in reference to the core service.

We define *pre-core service encounter period* as the time interval

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