

The Power of Senses

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Summary

Academics and practitioners coincide that customer service experiences (CSE) are today the number one differentiator for service providers. This new battlefield in which service providers seek to innovate with the goal to create extraordinary CSE, has similarly led to increased research attention across diverse disciplines. The complexity of the construct and scholars' efforts from multiple research fields, resulted in a fragmented body of literature that conceals gaining a comprehensive picture of CSE. Across three manuscripts, this dissertation investigates CSE and its five definitional dimensions: physical, social, cognitive, affective and sensory, with a particular focus on the largely neglected, latter dimension.

Manuscript 1 provides a status quo of CSE research for its core service and marketing field. The results of a systematic literature review depict the evolution of CSE research and shift in research foci from a strong provider perspective that largely investigates the role of products and brands, towards a value and interaction perspective, where increasingly a multi-actor perspective emerges. Besides this emerging holistic perspective on CSE, the results show important knowledge and research gaps, particularly for the sensory dimension. The findings highlight the need to look beyond disciplinary boundaries to be able to move the research field forward and gain a holistic understanding of multisensory CSE.

Since especially the sensory dimension of CSE remains a black box in contemporary service and marketing literature, manuscript 2 takes a much broader perspective on this phenomenon, exploring research areas beyond marketing. A cross-disciplinary perspective on the sensory dimension provides much needed insights on the interplay and activation of all senses and their effects on perceptual and behavioral outcomes. Drawing on neuroscientific and cognitive science insights and combining these with existing knowledge in service and marketing research, three integrative research directions to advance service and marketing research are proposed: increasing an understanding of (1) multisensory stimuli integration and perception, (2) the role of emotions in multisensory customer experiences, and (3) the influence of multisensory stimuli on behavioral outcomes.

Manuscript 3 takes a finer-grained perspective on multisensory CSE. Introducing the concept of schematic information processing, this

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manuscript uses an ethnographic schema elicitation technique (ESET) to unravel how customers (1) select sensory stimuli from the service environment, (2) match these stimuli with a set of existing schemas that are stored in form of experience memories, (3) evaluate whether or not existing schemas need to be modified to fit the current encounter and purpose, (4) and how these schemas are used to guide cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses. The findings of this study suggest that schematic information processing is the underlying process of CSE. Understanding this process is therefore vital for understanding why and how customers act the way they do across the customer journey, and what leads to their cognitive, emotional or behavioral responses at a touchpoint-specific level.