

Systematic Literature Overview: Gaps, Inconsistencies, Contradictions and Future Research Directions within Customer Experience Management

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ABSTRACT

The topic of Customer Experience Management has been actively debated over the last 25 years, however, marketing practitioners and theorists still don't seem to agree on the dimensions, definitions and nature of the construct. New emerging technologies such as wearable gadgets, IoT and natural language processing constantly offer new frontiers in both practical and theoretical research. The purpose of this literature overview is to identify the various research topics, issues and criticism within previous research and further research directions suggested, to identify reoccurring topics and points of issue, gaps within the theory or empirical proof, and be able to determine whether those points are addressed in later research. A model to classify the various topics, as well as a research agenda is proposed, with the aim allow future research to work on standardizing, unifying and building on existing research to prevent further silos and fractional research.

Keywords: Customer Experience Management, Experience Economy, Experiential Marketing, Literature Review.

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of Customer Experience has been actively debated over the last 25 years amongst marketing practitioners and theorists alike, and has evolved into a multidisciplinary research topic, covering and combining (yet possibly also fracturing) multiple disciplines such as marketing, sociology, psychology and even information technology and the number of articles published each year is increasing exponentially. The first focused discussions in the direction of Customer Experience Management started in the second half of the 20th century, with Lawrence Abbott stating that "What people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences" [1]. Even though "customer experience" has already been deemed an essential and impactful and a "new" economy since the 1990's [2], and further research has supported this view and contributed to the evolution of this topic throughout the 2000's, the field remains fragmented when it comes to a harmonization of praxis and theory. With earlier years focusing heavily on "experiential" and "service

oriented/driven" marketing as the replacement for the already outdated "goods-oriented marketing", the research of customer experience turned to establishing processes, measurements, tools and methods of mapping, designing and measuring customer experiences in organizations in the second half of the 2000's.

However, despite this construct growing larger and wider, papers published in the past few years are pointing out the lack of the most basic and fundamental of research questions having been answered and established within "customer experience management" construct – such as definition, context, dimensions and foundation [3]. Some even question the novelty and independence of this research stream, proposing research to clarify whether customer experience is not a continuation (or at least highly related to) of previous marketing streams such as customer satisfaction, service quality, relationship marketing, customer relationship management, customer centricity, and customer engagement [4].

At the same time, customer experience research continues in completely new directions (AI, augmented and virtual reality, employee experience, patient experience), and deep-diving in already covered topics - measuring the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of Customer Experience, insight collection through text mining and big data, expansion and improvement of mapping and modelling tools, inclusion in service design. This is driven by the rapidly changing environment, characterized by growing competition, accelerated pace of technology innovation, and a need to quickly respond to unpredicted change, where targeting specific customer segments can also create new competitors [5], [6]. Before further research is developed, it is detrimental to create a thorough overview on the research stream, to identify the various research topics, the issues and criticism within previous research and practical implications of the field that are addressed. Lastly, it is important to track the further research possibilities and directions suggested by the authors over the years, to identify reoccurring topics and points of issue, gaps within the theory or empirical proof, and be able to determine whether those points are addressed in later research.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main goal of this review is to identify the topics researched, contradictions, gaps, inconsistencies and further research directions/possibilities in the research within the Customer Experience (CX) research stream over the years.

Research object: Research within the Customer Experience Management topic

Research subject: Topics researched, contradictions, gaps, inconsistencies and further research directions

Research questions: What are the topics covered (RQ1), the contradictions, gaps, inconsistencies (RQ2) and further research directions (RQ3) identified in the research within the field of Customer Experience Management over the years?

3. METHOD

Systematic literature review was the chosen method for this review, in order to create a thorough and unbiased approach for selecting, reviewing and analyzing the available literature. Since this review aims to get an overview of the various topics and further research, this method allows quantitatively collecting and analyzing the available sources. MacDonald's [7] and Siddaway's [8] work was used as a guide for this systematic literature review: and the steps are covered in the next 2 chapters.

Scoping

In order to precisely define the relevant search criteria, an initial and high-level search and analysis of the existing literature on the subject was performed. This revealed that there are two distinct types of research: one started in the 50s and 60s [1] with a focus on the experience itself: "Customer Experience" (CE) – or how, to what extent and to which results does a customer perceives any direct or indirect interaction with any market entity [3]. Later (in the late 1990's and early 2000's) research split and evolved into "Customer Experience Management" – that focused on "the process of strategically managing a customer's entire experience with a product or company", with the goal of improving relationships to customers, and building up loyalty [9]. Initial scoping also revealed that there is an ambiguity in the usage of the word "experience", thus it is necessary to further eliminate literature not relevant to the object, but also ensure that only sources focusing on "Customer Experience Management" and not "Customer Experience" are selected for the overview.

Keywords identified for the literature search were:

"customer experience management", "customer experience quality", "customer experience innovation", "measuring customer experience", "customer experience design", "experience economy", "CXM", "CEM".

Due to the ambiguous nature of the usage of the keyword "experience" within the available literature, and the large amount of irrelevant literature returned, it was decided to limit the results as follows for each of the directories:

Web of Science Categories: business, management, economics, behavioural sciences, social sciences interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary sciences, communication; *Scopus:* Subject areas: business management and accounting, social sciences, economics econometrics and finance, decision sciences; *Keywords:* Experience Economy, Customer Experience.

Search and analysis

Search was performed in both directories using the previously identified keywords, and inclusion/exclusion criteria. 751 results were returned in Scopus, while 677 results in Web of science. Only the top 50 cited (25 from each of the databases) sources will be used for further analysis in the literature review, in order to cover only the most influential and most widely referenced sources.

A review of all abstracts was performed to identify any sources that are irrelevant to the overview in order to both exclude studies that (1) used the search keywords, but were not relevant to the research subject of "Customer Experience Management" (e.g. studied consumer perceptions, rather than strategic creation and management of those experiences), (2) were completely irrelevant to the subject (contained the keywords, but were not related or relevant to the discipline and subject), or (3) were the topic covered "consumer" research stream, which left in total 33 articles.

Further, a full text assessment was performed, where titles were eliminated if (1) the focus was too narrow, and didn't cover the "customer experience management" topic from a broad enough perspective to be able to determine general gaps and discussions within the entire field itself, or (2) focused too heavily on different fields of study (main cases were within the tourism/hospitality field, where the "customer experience management" part wasn't the main focus of the research).

4. RESULTS

Within the titles included in the review, the following structure for the review is suggested, based on the main areas or grander themes of research within the realm of Customer Experience Management:

1. Experiences as a new emerging "economic offering",
2. Paradigm shifts within marketing,
3. Definition and framework of Customer Experience Management,
4. Measuring the Customer Experience,
5. Co-creation of experiences,
6. Touchpoints, mapping and design/modelling

Experiences as a new emerging "economic offering"

The foundation for the systematic and continuous research in the stream of Customer Experience Management can be attributed to Pine & Gilmore, [2] with their publication in "Harvard Business Review" where they have coined the term "experience economy" and propose that following the agrarian, industrial and (then) recent service revolution: experiences are going to be the new economic offering, as distinct as commodities, goods and services. Their approach

is foundationally different from previous authors, such as Lawrence Abbott [1], as the core focus is no longer on how the customer's internal perspective and evaluation, but rather how companies and organization should approach this new economic offering, differentiate themselves from competitors and attempt to create an integrated strategic model based on which experiences can be staged [10]. Pine and Gilmore are establishing this new research stream as a multidisciplinary one, determined that in the future all organization (including nonentertainment / performance) will have to stage experiences similarly as "Disney" and "Fuerteventura" or, as they put it: "Companies should think about what they would do differently if they charged admission" [2]. This is also the first attempt to contextualize the customer experience management process, proposing that experiences can be split into 4 distinct realms: entertainment, educational, esthetic, escapist. Even though their framework of "staging" experiences for customers is later criticized as being too focused on entertaining and surprising the customers, ignoring their needs and wants, most future research and literature on "CEM" is based on this initial idea of being able to monetize on this new and emerging economic offering.

Paradigm shifts within marketing

In the early 2000's this research stream appears predominately in the marketing discipline, seemingly encouraged by the rather larger calls for paradigm changes already in motion: specifically the shift from goods to service oriented marketing – Vargo & Lusch [11] putting in question the future of goods oriented marketing within Pine and Gilmore's "experience economy" and proposing that the emerging service centered logic in marketing is the way. Although they are advancing the understanding of marketing, they are later criticized to "be grounded in rationalistic assumptions as per the traditional goods-dominant view of marketing", thus providing a service-centered logic that is both inadequate and incomplete [12]. It is important to note that despite the criticism of both Vargo and Lusch's incomplete approach to "service marketing", and Pine and Gilmore's heavy leaning on the staging and performance of experiences, their findings are used as a foundation for various future titles. Specifically related to marketing within the entertainment and leisure industry, utilizing the "four dimensions of experiences" is a frequent approach as a basis for the research structure, since those industries have the staging of experiences incorporated in the core [13].

The notion of the inseparability of "customers" and "services", as well as the customer being the focal point and completely central to the concept of marketing is also proposed, and that "a focus on the customer's experience is advocated as the point of departure for a new service orientation within marketing", and experiential marketing is put forward as a future research direction [12]. Yet a rift between theorists and practitioners remains, with the two working largely in silos, where practical titles are published without payment attention to the contributions from academics aiming to bring a deeper knowledge and understanding of experience marketing [14]. In addition, it seems that a majority of the early research is quite granular, and tackling very specific aspects of experimental marketing, rather than trying to unite the theory and praxis, and also bring together the multitude of proposed models, approaches and

methodologies in one integrated and interconnected framework.

Definition and framework of Customer Experience Management

To address this, simultaneously with the rise of experience marketing, there are a few attempts to unify the various Customer Experience Management related principles, definitions and practical literature, and create an integrated process for organizations to implement. Schwager and Meyer [15] make meaningful strides in that direction, by both defining the concept of Customer Experience as "the subjective response customers have to direct or indirect contact with a company, encompassing every aspect of an offering", establishing a practical process involving monitoring of past, present and potential patterns and determining that CEM (Customer Experience Management) has to involve every organization function in the effort for improvement, can't exclude noncustomer facing groups and most innovatively – moving the ownership from marketing, towards a centralized function within a company. Although their work is heavily practical, and mainly motivated by the need to provide a working framework to deal with ever greater customer freedom of choice, available communication channels and fragmented solutions and responsibilities within organizations – it does attempt to separate Customer Experience Management as a standalone research stream. While still being predominately attributed to research within marketing, Schweger's and Meyer's [15] bring to life a framework that is embedded, multidisciplinary and although not completely independent – describes and conceptualizes the entirety of the concept at once. However, the rift between practice and theory remains, and has again surfaced in recent years. In an attempt to remedy this, researchers have picked up this topic again [3], [14] pointing out the gaps and disagreement between practitioners and theorists (and even amongst themselves) on the definition, dimensions and foundations of Customer Experience Management, and provide their own version of an integrated framework. In addition, Verhoef [16] points out a need to even further broaden research including the social environments of the customers, to more concisely be able to both measures, but also predict the impact of various other elements (such as other customers, cultural norms and social trends) on the customer experience. However, trying to broaden an already fragmented and siloed area of research could exacerbate the current disagreements and lack of standardization, thus focusing on supporting or further developing some of the proposed models and frameworks with empirical and theoretical research should be considered as a more prioritized direction of future scholars and practitioners.

Cocreation of experiences

Although this concept appears in the early works of marketing researchers, the concept of cocreating experiences together with the customer's is still present throughout the years. The industries of tourism and hospitality have been specifically dominant, due to the already naturally existent element of customer involvement in the creation and immersion in the experience being the center of creating value from the purchase [17]. Cocreation criticizes too large of a focus on companies managing the entire experience of the customer, thus lacking insight into how and when customers want to

engage in the cocreation process, and how that affects the outcome [18], and also pointing out the vast possibilities of benefiting from external innovation through this [19]. The impact of other customers on the experience, as first pointed out as a research direction by Verhoef [16] has been attempted, yet is limited by complexity of capturing and interpreting the emotional responses [20]. It seems that this limitation is subject to change in the very recent future, thanks to development and adoption of various facial recognition and physical response reading technology (wearable and mobile) becoming available in the various markets [21]. This does bring up questions about privacy, data security and sensitivity, especially in the “aftermath” of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and with possibilities to manipulate and navigate the various regulations related to obtaining, maintaining and extending informed consent from consumers.

Measuring the CX

Ever since the conception of Customer Experience Management, various authors have attempted to define and establish a framework to quantify the impact of it on organizational results, criticizing Pine & Gilmore’s and other prior researcher’s work being largely conceptual and not containing proposals for empirical measurement [22], the entire concept being elusive, personal, individualized and loosely defined [23], and while practitioners are applying the framework in their organizations [24] little empirical research exists to support a practical way of measuring the experience (Luo, 2009). Research on this goes back to 2007, with a goal to define and establish a method to quantify the underlying concepts and dimensions of customer experience [23]. There is a consensus that the change in loyalty and word-of-mouth (also negative WOM) is the common goal of CX initiatives, but there is a need to further expand the proposed interactive models by trying to describe the link, impact and relationship between Service Quality (SERVQUAL), Customer Satisfaction (CSAT) and Customer Experience [25]. To bring all of the separate elements and dimensions together, while addressing the multichannel and disciplinary nature of the concept, Experience Quality (EXQ) scale consisting of 19 items within four dimensions is created and then developed further shortly thereafter [26], [27]. The approach of creating a wider-range of parameters to track the customer experience’s impact on loyalty, positive word-of-mouth and an organizations future performance (as opposed to choosing a main indicator of this) is a widely accepted approach within the field as of today.

However, despite the meaningful strides and development in CX measurement, there is a large gap that is becoming increasingly urgent with the rapid development of social media sites, multiple digital channels and a rise in unstructured data held by organizations – the need to capture insights from customers textual feedback [28], [29]. This is a complex task, that is most likely going to see more research focus in the coming years, due to the multilingual, domain related differences in the meaning of various texts and highly qualitative and interpretative nature [28]. Sentiment analysis, text mining and neural language processing is pointed out as relevant topics for future research, with more potential areas emerging thanks to the development of technologies, such as neuroscientific breakthroughs, allowing customer cues and

unconscious reactions to be read, interpreted and measured [3]. In addition, new wearable or mobile technology could provide an additional source of customer’s feelings throughout the touchpoints in real time [28].

Touchpoints, mapping and design/modelling

As customer experience management covers all interactions with a market entity [3], whether direct or indirect, throughout all the pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages [16], the area of touchpoints, mapping out and modelling the experience is crucial to the practical applications of the theoretical framework. This specifically delves into areas of service design and service experiences, looking in how to incorporate the Customer Experience Management principles into existing framework [30]–[33]. Here we also find inconsistencies and disagreements on whether “customer experience” should be measured and managed by organizations as an accumulation or summary of all interactions, or rather managed as a “map” with multiple touchpoints, each assigned their own goal and KPI [16], [34]. Regardless, technology is directly tied into the discussion, considering the multidevice and channel distribution and communications methods between organizations and companies: with researchers tackling this as early as 2008 [32]. Future research directions are mainly related to technology and human resources: creation of software tools helping the mapping process [33], focusing on organization employees as touchpoints [31].

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite the increasingly larger focus on Customer Experience Management as a standalone area of study within the field of marketing and the wide availability of various titles, researchers point to the still remaining gap between practical (business) and academic (theoretical) research, and the fragmented and inconsistent definitions, dimensions and foundations of Customer Experience Management [3], [16]. This can be attributed to the multidisciplinary nature of the research area, as well as the multitouch point and dimension dependencies of the approach within organizations. Although meaningful strides have been made to harmonize and unify this over the past 15 years, new emerging technologies such as wearable gadgets, IoT and natural language processing constantly offer new frontiers in both practical and theoretical research that should be pursued [28]. At the same time, it is important to continue developing EXQ scales to structure, contextualize and make the customer experience measurable and transparent, to avoid biased personal opinions, and basing the truth on personal experience, not evidence [26], [27], [28], [29], [35]. It is clear that this area will remain a popular and hotly debated topic amongst academics and practitioners, and it is important to continuously work on standardizing, unifying and building on existing research that have already put in the effort to achieve this, to prevent further silos and fractional research that doesn’t help the discussions progress in a meaningful way.

Despite the smaller scope of this review, only including the most cited sources in as part of the further analysis, this review offers an extensive overview over the most popular research topics, as well as inconsistencies and gaps within the

area of Customer Experience Management. Further research should build upon this by narrowing the scope to the last 3 years, to cover less referenced research, and using the already existing framework of describing the dimensions, constructs and parameters of Customer Experience Management as put forward by already existing sources [3], [16], instead of attempting to create a novel integrated methodology for this, further fragmenting the research topic.

With the aforementioned rise of new technological capabilities, allowing for new ways of measuring, interacting with and engaging customers, as well as those aspects entering the realm of the public sector [28], research agenda for the next years can be suggested in these directions:

1. Reading of emotional cues using new technologies (wearables/mobiles/multifunctional scanners), and incorporation across touchpoints;
2. Re-evaluation of EXQ scale items in the context of using unstructured data for insights;
3. Privacy concerns (informed consent) emerging with new technology (AI, IoT, natural language processing, gadgets reading emotional and responsial cues) development;
4. Customer experience in the public sector;
5. Expansion and inclusion of additional actors in the framework (partners, competitors, other customers).

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