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Customer journey self-mapping: a qualitative method for evaluating new store formats

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Introduction

Digitalization has metamorphosed the retail landscape, inspiring new touchpoints, channels and customer behaviours. Retailers have developed new store concepts to meet customers' changing preferences and we have seen the development of store formats that offer unique and exciting experiences (e.g., pop-up stores), those that use new technology (e.g., scan-and-go, unmanned stores), or unusual geographical locations (e.g., IKEA city-centre stores, shop-in-shops) in order to offer convenience (e.g., Egan-Wyer et al., 2021; Gauri et al., 2020; Hultman et al., 2017; Rudkowski et al., 2020).

The new retail landscape, comprising new types of touchpoints and new store formats enables increasingly complex customer journeys, involving multiple online and offline touchpoints, perhaps simultaneously (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Mele et al., 2021). Despite considerable research on both the customer journey (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rudkowski et al., 2020; Towers & Towers, 2022) and on retail format development (e.g., Egan-Wyer et al., 2021; Hultman et al., 2017; Reutterer & Teller, 2009; Rudkowski et al., 2020; Willems, Leroi-Werelds & Swinnen, 2016) our knowledge on how new retail formats create value in contemporary customer journeys is still scarce. Given the subjective and individual nature of contemporary customer journeys, how should academics and practitioners understand customers' shopping behaviours and preferences in the new retail landscape? In this paper, we present a methodological approach to help capture the complex and contextual nature of contemporary customer journeys from the consumer's perspective.

Literature overview

Existing methods for capturing or "mapping" customer journeys seek to abstract a typically linear (e.g., Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016) journey map from data extracted from customers (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014) via surveys (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018), interviews (Marquez, Downey & Clement, 2015), diaries (Halvorsrud, Kvale & Følstad, 2016), smart phones (Kojo, Heiskala & Virtanen, 2014) experiments (Vakulenko et al., 2019) or a combination of the above. According to Følstad and Kvale's (2018) systematic review of customer journey literature, these abstracted maps tend to aggregate observations from multiple individuals into a common or typical customer journey (e.g., Crosier & Handford, 2012; Trischler & Zehrer, 2012) rather than exploring the situational and contextual nature of individual customer journeys and experiences. While this is clearly useful for understanding the big picture, it is less helpful for understanding the nuances that emerge when differentiated touchpoints, such as new store formats, make existing customer journeys more complex.

Theory

Today, it is widely accepted that a customer journey is made up of multiple touchpoints, each potentially involving different kinds of contact, all of which contribute to the overall customer experience of a retail organisation (e.g., Bagdare & Jain, 2013; Jain & Bagdare, 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Verhoef et al., 2009). It is also recognised that customer experience is co-created (e.g., Chandler & Lusch, 2015; De Keyser et al., 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2002) and cannot be understood in isolation (Verhoef et al., 2009). A customer experience is constructed through emotional, cognitive, social and sensorial components created during the customer journey (e.g., Homburg, Jozic & Kuehn, 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Schmitt, 2003; Verhoef et al., 2009), where experiences occur each

time the customer interacts with any part of the service, product, store and brand, across various points in time and space (e.g., Pantano & Viassone, 2015; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010).

Customer journey self-mapping

Our method of customer journey self-mapping is qualitative and explorative. We seek to understand from the customer's own perspective and in their own words how new touchpoints fit into their journeys, what value they add, what touchpoints they replace, and what additional touchpoints they lead to. Our method builds on the Stauss and Weinlich's (1997) Sequential incident technique (SIT), which attempts to capture all perceived incidents in a customer journey. As in SIT, our data are collected retrospectively, via interviews. Unlike SIT, we do not provide pre-determined contact points or phases to structure the data collection—e.g., “describe your experience at the airport reception”. Instead, we use open-ended prompts (simple logos on squares of paper), which allow customers to physically model a full customer journey for a recalled purchase and to focus on the touchpoints that they themselves think are important. Allowing respondents to define and explain their own touchpoints on the customer journey allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the new kinds of (non-linear) customer journeys that might be built around new types of touchpoints, and the unexpected ways in which customers might experience and derive value from new formats. In other words, it provides insight into how actual journeys are experienced by consumers and how they deviate from the journeys expected by retail managers. Performing the exercise in focus groups rather than individual interviews improves the quality of the data by allowing participants to inspire each other and to be reminded of parts of the journey that they might have otherwise forgotten (Morgan, 1993).



Contributions

In their influential article on customer journeys, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) call on researchers to involve the customer in mapping their own journeys. Deep understanding of customer journeys and, they suggest, will reveal new ways to influence them (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). We have taken this call seriously, and developed a methodology that allows researchers to understand complex, non-linear and contextual customer journeys from the customer's own perspective. We anticipate that this kind of customer journey self-mapping will be especially useful for studies of new store formats and last-mile touchpoints, many of which trigger new kinds of customer experience (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021) that researchers and retail managers do not yet fully understand. It may also be of use when studying multichannel retail servicescapes, in which non-linear customer journeys are foreseeable.

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