



Drivers of customers' service experiences: a study in the restaurant industry

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify, portray and analyse the frequent drivers of customer service experiences as described by customers in their own words – the voice of the customer.

Design/methodology/approach – A critical incident technique study was conducted, based on 122 interviews, including 195 favourable and unfavourable narratives, about customer experiences. The data were analysed in an inductive manner and the results are presented by means of extracts from the narratives.

Findings – The findings describe the dimensions of drivers of customers' favourable and unfavourable experiences and the frequent drivers, the social interaction, the core service and the physical context.

Research limitations/implications – Customer experiences are processes and include dynamic interactions and the customer as a co-producer. The study context is limited to the restaurant setting and Swedish customers.

Practical implications – For managers the results suggest that great effort needs to be put into understanding the process of customer experiences and the various interactions involved, especially social interactions and the crucial roles of contact employees and customers involved in these interactions.

Originality/value – The paper provides a detailed description and analysis of the frequent and less frequent drivers of favourable, and unfavourable customer experiences – the constellation of drivers. The findings are illustrated by extracts from customer narratives and show how experiences occur and that experiences are processes occurring in a social and physical environment when people do things together. Furthermore, the paper introduces customer experience to service dominant logic by describing the dynamics of resource interactions in customer experience formation.

Keywords Customer orientation, Social interaction, Restaurants, Sweden, Customer services quality, Corporate strategy

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Every company must find ways to keep and attract new customers and at the same time remain competitive and profitable. As consumers today have more information

available, are more flexible in their decisions and have many more choices than before, it is even more important for service firms to win the loyalty of their customers. Furthermore the choice of consumers today is not static, rather they test a variety of goods and services in order to achieve different experiences, their choice varies with context and they often use different decision strategies (Williams, 2000). To be competitive, the management of service companies need to understand the uniqueness of their customers and what contributes to their value.

Within service research, customer experience has been treated as embedded in service quality and is measured by comparing expectations before, and perceptions after the experience, or perceptions only, through different predetermined service attributes. Consequently service quality measures the outcome of service processes perceived by customers. A widely used instrument for attribute-based measuring of service quality is SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). In these types of studies, customers are regarded as interacting with and assessing employees and the service environment by means of predetermined attributes. Customers are seen as being passive observers, who process information and afterwards evaluate the service interactions as an outcome, but their personal interactions with others in a social context – the customer process – is not explicitly considered and empirically explored (Lindquist and Persson, 1997, p. 93; Williams, 2000; Stauss and Weinlich, 1996; Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). Even though service interactions have been pointed out as one of the most important elements in services (see Schneider and White's (2004) discussion in chapter 3), most focus in research has been put on customers' perceptions at the expense of interactions and processes (Echeverri, 1999, p. 10).

Other tools, applied to consider the customers' view, are methods whereby service processes are deconstructed into detailed sequences of the customer journey, in order to visualize them in a systematic overview, for example service blueprinting (Shostack, 1985). What a smile or a dialogue with an employee means for the customer could not be revealed by using this approach, which indicates a need for integration of the results of a blueprint into the service organisation as discussed and illustrated by Bitner *et al.* (2008).

A complementary view, which also considered the emotional side of customer experiences, was discussed, as an hedonic experience, by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982). This approach has a strong focus on multi-sensory aspects of customers' experiences of high involving products and services in the customer environment (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) leading to multi-sensory images and emotional feelings such as joy or fear. This approach shows that consumers not only want to use a product but that there is something else that influences them. Experience has become an important part of companies' marketing and it is also the basis for the emerging experience economy (Pine and Gillmore, 1998). However the application of experiential thinking has most often been used to manage formal aspects, such as details in the environment, without making an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the customers' consumption experiences and their interactions with a company's offer (Carù and Cova, 2007; Meyer and Schwager, 2007).

To summarise, the focus of research about customer experience has been on customers' cognitive based perception of predetermined attribute dimensions that measure the outcome of service processes. Details about customers' individual emotional processes of service experiences, described as "an interactive relativistic

preference experience" (Holbrook, 2006) including customers' own interactions with employees and the physical environment were not considered. In addition the methods and measurements used, only described customer experiences by general measures without distinguishing the importance of variables. This study will contribute to closing this knowledge gap by exploring customer service experiences from the customer's point of view, and by studying the drivers of customer service experiences, which are regarded as the mechanisms that evoke customer experiences.

The aim of this paper is to identify, portray and analyse the frequent drivers of customer service experiences as described by customers in their own words – the voice of the customer.

Theoretical framing

First, a definition of what the term "customer experience" means in this paper will be given, then the concept service will be discussed. Thereafter the concepts of customer value and customer experience, the physical environment and aspects concerning social interactions will be presented.

Customer experience – service experience

Experience is an often-used term, which has been increasingly discussed since the beginning of 2000 (Carù and Cova, 2007), but it is rarely defined. Therefore a definition of what customer experience means in this paper is necessary.

Sundbo and Hagedorn-Rasmussens's (2008) definition of a customer experience shows that the customer is actively involved in some way and takes memory aspects into account. According to them a customer experience is "a mental journey that leaves the customer with memories of having performed something special, having learned something or just having fun". It should be added that the result of the mental journey could be both favourable and unfavourable. According to Johnston and Clark's (2005, pp. 7-10) more operational and process-oriented view, a service consists of a customer's service experience plus the perception of the outcome of the service experience. In some services, such as restaurants, there is no clear borderline between these two; and the buying of a meal, the eating and being served and the guests' feelings during the process are not separable. Further Johnston and Clark (2005) define a service experience as the customers' direct experience of the service process, the organisation, the facilities, other customers and how the customer is treated by the service firm's representatives. Indirect experiences concern customers' encounters with messages sent by a company's products and brands, often as word of mouth, advertising or restaurant reviews (Meyer and Schwager, 2007). According to them service experiences are usually initiated by the customer. The outcome of a service experience could be tangible outputs, value, emotions and judgements and/or intentions (Johnston and Clark, 2005, p. 9), which is partly in line with other definitions where the outcomes of experiences are described as cognitive, behavioural and emotional responses (Edvardsson, 2005; Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005). Further, Johnston and Clark (2005) add that the customers have to make an input themselves, including time, money and effort.

In this article a customer experience is defined as the customer's direct and indirect experience of the service process, the organisation, the facilities and how the customer interacts with the service firm's representatives and other customers. These in turn

create the customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses and leave the customer with memories about the experience. Further, a customer experience is seen as occurring in a commercial context, and is therefore regarded as being shaped and offered by a service company, which has a commercial purpose.

The concept service

The concept of service has changed from characterising services by comparing them with goods (Lovelock, 1983) – intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability (IHIP) – to a perspective, often referred to service dominant logic (SDL) (Vargo and Lush, 2004). In SDL goods and services are regarded as being integrated and the customer is portrayed to be actively involved as a co-creator (Vargo and Lush, 2008; Vargo, 2008). Instead focus is put on where value for customers arises, the value creation in the customers' own context (Gummesson, 2008; Grönroos, 2008; Vargo and Lush, 2004, 2008). Co-creation occurs when operant resources (skills and knowledge about how to do things) act on other operant resources or on operand resources (goods and physical resources) (Vargo and Lush, 2004). The result then is value in use, (or value-in-context), or the customer experience. The SDL perspective changes the role of the customer from being seen as an operand resource, something is done to them by the service firm, to being regarded as an operant resource, someone who does something actively during value co-creation. The resulting value in use of, e.g. the customer's experience of a restaurant service is judged by the customer in the customer's own processes and activities (Vargo and Lush, 2004; Normann and Ramirez, 1994; Holbrook, 1994). This means that, for example, a restaurant firm can only offer value propositions, which can be actively used by customers during co-creation, when creating their own value through interaction with the product and/or service. Regarding a car, the value for the customer is created when the car is used by the customer, independently of the car being bought or rented, which makes clear that value is finally experienced by the customer after consumption and the car should be seen as a value proposition (Gummesson, 2008; Grönroos, 2008). As services are experienced as being favourable or not, from both the customer's and the organisation's point of view, it is fundamental for service firms to put the customer experience in focus. In doing so the dynamic nature of services could be understood and the service firm could be better prepared to actively take part in their customers' experiences (Grönroos, 2008). Therefore studying prerequisites and drivers of (mechanisms that evoke) customer experiences seen from the customer's point of view could provide a better understanding of the process of service co-creation and customer value formation.

Customer value and customers' service experience

A more concise explanation catching the dynamic nature of service experiences is given by Holbrook's definition of customer value, as "an interactive relativistic preference experience" (Holbrook, 2006, p. 212). Here value creation/customer experience, is seen from the customer's perspective and occurs always in an interaction between a product and a customer – whatever a producer can offer and whatever the type of customer. The interaction is relativistic in at least three senses: comparative, personal and situational. The customers' experienced value depends on what they compare with and the context or situation of consumption. The experience is different between individuals: an evening dinner could be a pleasure for the grown ups

at the table and less pleasurable for the children at the table for example. In addition consumers' preferences illustrate that individuals prefer one thing to another, which could be expressed in different ways such as attitudes (like/dislike), affect (favourable/unfavourable), evaluation (good/bad), behavioural tendency (approach/avoid) to name some. Finally, Holbrook states that value is really to be found in the consumption experience and not in any product *per se* (Holbrook, 1994, 2006). This depicts interactions as the most central points of the consumption experience and the consumers as active individuals who are continuously involved in the creation of their own experience, which in its turn is the core message of SDL according to Vargo and Lush (2004).

The physical environment

The physical environment is important for customer experiences since most services occur in an environment, where the customer is present during the whole – or parts of – the service co-creation process. An often used framework, supported from the literature in environmental psychology, is Bitner's (1992) conceptual framework of the servicescape. The servicescape is the man-made physical surrounding, which may invoke in customers a desire to stay and in employees a willingness to work (Bitner, 1992). The servicescape framework includes three environmental dimensions, ambient conditions (including factors affecting the five senses), space and function (including arrangement of details in the room and their ability to facilitate the customers' purpose) and signs, symbols and artefacts (explicit or implicit signals about the company that influence the customer) which lead to a holistically perceived servicescape. These have varying cognitive, emotional and physiological impacts on customers, which finally cause approach or avoidance behaviour. A limitation of this framework is that social elements that can affect the service experience are not considered. However, social aspects as a part of the physical service environment, have been taken into account, in a recent framework about the experience room, by Edvardsson *et al.* (2005). Their experience room framework includes five dimensions, physical artefacts, intangible artefacts, technology and customer placement and customer involvement as social factors. Both Bitner's and Edvardsson *et al.*'s frameworks are conceptual, whereby the latter illustrates the concept with empirical data, none of the frameworks is based on empirical data from a customer perspective. The fact that customers are actively involved as co-producers of services (Grönroos, 1990, 2008; Vargo and Lush, 2004) and that they according to Aubert-Gamet (1997) actively use the physical environment offered by the service firm is considered in Edvardsson *et al.*'s framework, but not in Bitner's. The research context of most empirical research concerning the servicescape is retailing and the focus in the studies is one environmental element only such as scent or music (Pareigis, 2009). Accordingly there seems to be a need for empirical research in other empirical contexts, focusing on the customer experience of the physical environment as a whole and the role it plays, as stated by Ezech and Harris (2007).

Social interactions

The "service encounter" refers to the social interactions as a central subject, discussed within service literature and marketing (Czepiel *et al.*, 1985; Gupta and Vajic, 2000; Bitner, 1990; Normann, 1991; Grönroos, 1990; Bitran and Lojo, 1993) and for example within the field of hospitality (Lugosi, 2008; Lashley and Morrison, 2000; Lashley *et al.*,

2007). Social interactions occur between customers and employees and also between customers. Interactions between employees are not considered in this study. According to Lovelock (1983) the grade of involvement of people as recipients of services and the tangible or intangible nature of services determine how service delivery should be designed. Other researchers state that it is through the social context individuals create their meaning (Carù and Cova, 2007; Arnould and Price, 1993; Gupta and Vajic, 2000) and social interactions are an “essential part of the (experience) process”, they are “a medium through which customers construct their own meanings of the context and shape their preferences” (Gupta and Vajic, 2000, p. 39), consequently customer experiences are socially created and context specific. But experiences only occur when customers actively interact in the physical and social context (Gupta and Vajic, 2000, p. 43), which shows that customers' presence in the service environment has a great impact on how services and especially customer-employee-environment interactions should be designed (Schneider and White, 2004). Other aspects that concern the social interaction are, according to Bitran and Lojo (1993) and Bitran *et al.* (2008), how customers themselves structure their whole customer experience, the time aspect – both waiting time and time perception in general, social justice including fair treatment and how problems that come up are treated in interaction with employees. Customers are, due to the character of the service, more or less actively involved in creating their meaning through interactions in the social and physical environment.

Methodology

We selected the restaurant setting as the empirical context, since restaurant services, are used by most people. Restaurant customers must go to the restaurant and they stay there at least for a while. The customers' presence at the restaurant makes the close interpersonal interactions, between employees, and customers, and, also between customers, visible for customers, and the restaurant firm (Lovelock, 1983). Restaurants could be classified as high-contact services as the service is produced in the presence of the customer (Schneider and White, 2004) as well as the interactions between customers and the other parts of the restaurant offering are important. Further restaurant services represent the most common characteristics of services. First, they are interactions. Second, they include activities, and third, the customer is actively involved as a co-producer (Grönroos, 1990). Processes are also emphasised as the most fundamental of services by Lovelock (1983). Moreover, customers spend time and money in restaurants in search of pleasure, conviviality and interactions (Warde and Martens, 2000), and because of this, restaurants provide a good opportunity to study the customers' participation in an experiential context (Schneider and White, 2004).

Regarding the aim of this study the research design must facilitate an explorative approach of the customer service experience, focusing on the interaction with different parts of the service environment and it must catch the voice of the customer. Therefore the critical incident technique (CIT) according to Flanagan (1954) was applied. CIT has been used in several empirical studies as a method to identify and analyse shortcomings in service quality (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Edvardsson, 1992; Edvardsson, 1988; Bitner, 1990; Nyquist *et al.*, 1985) and the method is especially useful when the purpose is to describe a “real world phenomenon based on thorough understanding” (Grove and Fisk, 1997, p. 67; Olsen, 1992) and also when the goal is to collect short narratives (Czarniawska, 2004, pp. 43-4). An incidence is “any observable human

activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327). Critical incidents in this study were treated as narratives and the meaning, context and understanding of the narrator was in focus. In the following section, facts about the interviewees will be discussed, how the data collection was prepared and conducted and facts about the interviews. The coding process will also be presented and credibility challenges will be discussed.

In this study, 122 interviews were made and 195 incidents collected. This corresponds to Gremler's (2004, p. 73) recommendations. Interviewing was terminated when saturation of the data material was reached (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A total of 19 interviews were unusable, and 65 interviewees did not want to join the study. From a gender perspective, half of the respondents were men and half were women (see Table I). Most of the interviewees, 83 per cent, were between 31 and 65 years old, 11 per cent were between 18 and 30 and 5 percent of them were older than 65. Concerning the frequency of eating out, 52 per cent of the interviewees stated that they eat out more than twice a week, 42 per cent more than twice a month and 4 per cent less than twice per month.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted in Swedish, lasted from a few minutes to 20 minutes and each contained between one to five critical incidents. All interviews were conducted by the first author in natural settings of real life, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (2007, p. 10). They were held at Arlanda Airport, at two hotels in the City of Stockholm and at a hotel in the centre of Örebro during spring 2008, places where it is possible to collect data from a great number of individuals with a broad background. The environment at these locations facilitates interviewing and allows the use of a voice recorder as well as making notes.

Interviews

Before starting data collection, test interviews were conducted and an interview guide was discussed and modified after the test interviews and discussions.

The interviewees were first informed briefly about the research project and asked whether or not they wanted to join the study. If they accepted they were asked the questions of step 1 shown in Table II. Criteria for restaurants were not given to the interviewees, as the goal was to get a broad picture of restaurant experiences from different kinds of restaurants. The consecutive questions were organised as described in Table II, which follows the recommendations of Stauss (1993, p. 412). Follow up questions were asked when considered necessary and when the situation allowed it. Probing questions were used when necessary in order to get more detailed information about facts named by the interviewees. Finally the interviewees were asked for some background facts and whether they wanted to add anything else.

Criteria for incidents to be included in the study were:

- (1) A direct contact between the service provider and the customer, and the interviewee being the person who interacts with the restaurant, not any other person.

	Number of interviews recorded	Number of persons that did not want to join the study	Total number of persons asked	Number of interviews usable	Interviews not usable	Female	Male	Pos Inc	Neg Inc
Örebro	8	0	8	8	0	5	3	6	6
Stockholm	48	20	68	42	6	21	21	37	25
Arlanda Airport	85	45	130	72	13	35	37	80	41
Total	141	65	206	122	19	61	61	123	72

Table I.
Facts about the
interviews/interviewees

- (2) Very favourable or unfavourable (the evaluation is done from the point of view of the interviewee and should be respected).
- (3) The incident should be a discrete episode.
- (4) Have sufficient details to be fully understood.
- (5) The incident should have occurred in restaurants in Sweden.

All interviews were recorded by means of a digital voice recorder, transferred to the PC of the first author and written down verbatim by the first author.

Coding process

The coding process began while conducting the interviews and continued while listening and writing the texts. All texts were imported into the qualitative data analysis software Maxqda 2007, where all coding and memos are documented. The formal coding was done in two steps. In the first step the drivers of favourable and unfavourable customer restaurant experiences were investigated and in the second step the frequent drivers were analysed.

In step one, the data was coded in an inductive approach by using the principles of constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). First a basic coding frame was extracted from the first eight interviews. Then the remaining texts were read, compared to the basic coding frame and thereafter coded, which finally lead to a structure for every main category and its subcategories. Substantive codes, held very close to the texts (Glaser, 1978) and more interpretive codes were used (Miles and Huberman, 2007) and gradually the coding frame was confirmed while the type of coding changed from open to selective coding (Glaser, 1978, p. 61). Text segments were related to several codes when considered necessary, and the same code could be applied several times in one narrative. The codes were revised four times and all codes and text segments were compared, grouped, changed and regrouped. During these revisions subcategories emerged which gave structure to the substantive codes.

In the second step the frequent drivers of the customer experiences were analysed in each narrative. These drivers were described by the interviewees and followed up by probing. One to three of the most important drivers in every single narrative were registered in a separate file. Frequencies were then counted, as they were helpful in further structuring the result. Finally the categories for frequent and less frequent drivers of customers' favourable and unfavourable restaurant experiences emerged.

One example of coding of the drivers is in a narrative from a first-class restaurant at the seaside, where the interviewee described the outstanding food and the atmosphere

Table II.
The different steps of asking and the questions asked during the interviews

Questions Step 1	Think of two to three occasions when you have been at a restaurant in Sweden in the last two years (or, if earlier, then the interviewees were asked to tell when the incident occurred), where you experienced your restaurant visit very favourably or very unfavourably
Questions Step 2	Could you describe in detail the situation and what happened during the restaurant visit?
Follow up questions	What exactly made you feel the situation was favourable or unfavourable, how did the experience influence you, how did the employees handle the situation and how did you experience the physical environment and the atmosphere?

as the most important driver. The drivers were coded under the main categories of the core service and the atmosphere. No differentiation was made in relation to the importance of these two drivers.

It was at XY ... it was extraordinary food with a lot of fantastic tastes, and then there was the atmosphere, it was so beautiful – the whole archipelago and the environment around the restaurant, it is so calm and peaceful ... (A14).

Credibility

The research process and strategy was kept transparent for the reader by showing from which theoretical concepts interpretations were made. CIT was applied to conduct short narratives and data analysis was done in an interpretive way as recommended by Gremler (2004). The use of CIT worked well to collect a great number of short narratives about customer experiences within a reasonable time, and it also facilitated a rich description of the result, which is also stated by Olsen (1992). The interviews were pre-tested, and closeness to the data was maintained, as all interviews, were conducted, by the first author, who also did the transcription, and analysis. The analysis was carried out at a detailed level and was assessed by two additional judges from different research backgrounds. Overall there was good agreement between the judges and the first author. In the cases where the judges held different views, the differences were discussed until agreement was reached. Frequencies were used to give a useful structure to the result that emerged from the data (Miles and Huberman, 2007) and the conclusions made are supported by details from the data. The interviewees remembered more favourable incidents compared to unfavourable (compare with (Johnston, 1995)). Reasons for this could be the nature of visiting a restaurant, which is almost always connected with positive feelings, compared to other services with a lower level of pleasure, such as visiting a bank or trying to reach a company's telephone service for complaining.

The choice of hotels and airport restaurants as the settings for interviews could have biased the interviewees towards telling incidents from these types of settings. However airport and hotel restaurants represent only a small number of all narratives collected. The hotel and airport restaurant settings were rather considered as a type of stimulus for the interviewees to get started to recall critical incidents. In addition this environment helped to make the interview to be more like a personal conversation than an academic one.

Results

Eight main categories providing an overall picture of the prerequisites and the frequent and less frequent drivers of favourable and unfavourable customer restaurant experiences emerged from the data. The results are presented comprehensively in Table III, where the main categories of drivers are defined, their subcategories and their frequency and percentage occurrence are presented. The frequent and less frequent drivers are presented for favourable and unfavourable experiences, with the frequent driver first and the less last. The frequencies differ between the main categories as a whole and the main categories of the frequent and less frequent drivers. The reason for the differences is that not all of the facts that were told in the narratives had a strong influence on the customer experience, but still they contributed to the

Table III.
Dimensions of drivers of customers' favourable and unfavourable experiences in the restaurant context and the frequent/less frequent subcategories of drivers of customer experiences

<i>Main category</i> Definition of main category Subcategory (descending order)	Frequency Main category % <i>n</i>	Frequency Drivers % <i>n</i>	Frequent/less frequent subcategories as drivers of customer experiences (presented in descending order)
<i>Social interaction</i> The customers' experiences that refer to different types of human interaction, especially with employees but also with other guests Guest-employee interaction, guests' overall perception of service quality, complaint and recovery, guest-guest interaction	18 322	40 141	<i>Frequent drivers</i> <i>Favourable</i> Guest-employee interaction of service quality Guests' overall perception of service quality Guest-guest interaction Complaint and recovery <i>Unfavourable</i> Guest-employee interaction Complaint and recovery Guests' overall perception of service quality Guest-guest interaction
<i>The core service of the restaurant</i> The customers' experiences referring to food and beverages Experience of food and beverage quality, food and beverage strongly related to aspects on service quality, time as a part of food and beverage experience, type of food, aspects concerning restaurant concept, visual presentation of food and beverages, menu aspects, guest involvement	17 313	36 127	<i>Favourable</i> Experience of food and beverage quality Food and beverage strongly related to service quality Time Visual presentation of food and beverages Menu aspects Guest involvement <i>Unfavourable</i> Experience of food and beverage quality Time Defective hygiene Menu aspects
<i>The physical environment</i> The customers' experiences that refer to different parts of the physical environment of the restaurant, including the exterior and people The interior, people, sensory aspects on the physical context, the room, the exterior, the table and the seating, the view, overall perceptions of the physical environment, the building	20 369	10 35	<i>Favourable</i> The interior/exterior Positive perception of physical environment The walk before or after the stay at the restaurant <i>Unfavourable</i> Negative perception of physical environment The interior/exterior Placement of guests
<i>Less frequent drivers</i>			(continued)

<i>Main category</i> Definition of main category Subcategory (descending order)	Frequency Main category %	<i>n</i>	Frequency Drivers %	<i>n</i>	Frequent/less frequent subcategories as drivers of customer experiences (presented in descending order)
<i>The restaurant</i> This main category is defined as the facts told by the interviewees about the restaurants visited, their owners and the location	11	195	3	12	<i>Favourable</i> Different/unique food Service concept The total experience
<i>Price and payment procedure</i> This main category refers to how customers relate their total restaurant experience to the price they paid and how they experience the payment procedure Experience of price, experience of payment procedure	2	43	3	11	<i>Favourable</i> Price Smooth payment procedure <i>Unfavourable</i> Price
<i>The atmosphere</i> This main category refers to the experiences the interviewees associate with atmosphere in a specific situation Physical context, people and behaviour, situation	6	109	3	10	<i>Favourable</i> Physical context People and behaviour
<i>The guest</i> This main category refers to different variables which are connected to the individual customer as a human being and which influence the customer's experience Previous experience, memory expectations, the guest's preferences and background	8	148	2	6	<i>Favourable</i> Guests' preferences Unexpected event <i>Unfavourable</i> Previous experience Memory and expectation
<i>The occasion</i> This main category is defined as the occasional aspects influencing the customers' restaurant experience Circumstance, people and company, time of the day/season, place	18	317	2	7	<i>Favourable</i> Good company The special occasion

Table III.

overall experience. The frequent drivers include the social interaction, the core service and the physical environment; the less frequent drivers include the restaurant, the price and payment procedure, the atmosphere, the guest and the occasion.

Most often there is more than one driver involved in the customers' restaurant experience formation, and the customer interacts with a constellation of drivers. The material also shows that there could be an interaction between the drivers, and this is visible in the extracts presented in the following sections. The focus of presentation will be on the frequent drivers.

The frequent drivers – social interaction

This main category shows that guests who feel that employees give them enough attention, are friendly and service oriented at the arrival and throughout the whole stay, have some dialogue with them during the stay, use their knowledge and skills without being too dominant, are likely to have a favourable experience and vice versa. Guests feel treated well when employees care about them, as shown in the following extract where a group celebrated the birthday of an old lady at a restaurant. Because of the old lady they needed time to eat and she also needed some extra lighting because it was too dark to read the menu. The employees also changed their table when they arrived.

When we arrived at the restaurant they seated us at a better (less noisy) table than they thought from the beginning, they did not know that my mother (a lady about 85 years old who celebrated her birthday) was so old ... To better see the menu they helped her with the lighting, they did not hurry. Everything was allowed to take time ... As we were eating three courses everything needed to take time, they really did not rush us ... They really tried to keep everything at our tempo, and they really listened to us (A10).

Another extract describes unsatisfying employee behaviour. A waitress does not seem to be interested in what she is serving and what each of her guests had ordered, which she tried to find out somehow.

We ... ordered our food and when the waitress came with the food she said, some type of meat, she looked around because she wanted to find out who had ordered which course. Her behaviour seemed to give the impression of disinterest, because the one serving the guests had no idea about what was on the menu ... (A68).

When guests complain and they are met with respect and with the right recovery offerings, they tend to be satisfied and vice versa. The fact that guests were not satisfied with the complaint and recovery situation occurred more often than satisfied guests in the same situation. The material also shows that guests bring some personal knowledge and experience to the restaurant. However their own knowledge is not always enough and when this lack of knowledge is not met by employees through communication, the guest's experience could become unfavourable. This is shown in the following extract where the guest orders a specific cut of beef, beef cheek, which did not meet her expectations.

It was almost like a roll of meat, I have forgotten how it was served ... I had a totally different idea about how the taste experience would be like. Then it struck me, I should have let them know that I did not like the dish, I was not so good in asking for more details about this meat dish and its taste. However I did not ask them. I'm really not so good in doing this (N15).

Guests can influence other guests through their behaviour and make guests interact with one another. This is shown in the following extract, where a group of guests celebrated a birthday, and their singing for the birthday child at the restaurant made other guests to sing too.

At the table next to us ... they also had a birthday child at their table. They started to sing a song for him, and we thought that it did not sound so good, so all of us sitting at our table started to sing too (A81).

The frequent drivers – the core service

This main category and its subcategories show that aspects of the core service (food and beverage aspects) are central for customers' experiences. Time was very important in unfavourable experience processes compared to favourable cases and service aspects closely related to food aspects were only mentioned or referred in favourable cases.

The frequent drivers of favourable and unfavourable experiences are about how dissatisfying or outstanding the core service quality was experienced. The following extracts show that guests have no problems in assessing the quality of a dish in relation to the level and type of the restaurant and their expectations.

We ate something as simple as fried pork with an onion béchamel, which was so wonderful, everything was alright, although it was only fried pork and an onion béchamel (A37).

It was in a high class restaurant, me and my partner went out to eat, for something special, of course we had really high expectations ... then they served the bread, very unremarkable bread, then you are disappointed ... a bread you can get in every co-operative shop (A61).

Frequent drivers of unfavourable experiences were the guests' experience of time, explained as long waiting time and bad timing of food and beverages. These are illustrated in the following extract, which also point to the fact that the bad timing and long waiting time occurred in combination with bad service at a high-class restaurant.

On your birthday we went to XY, what I did not like there at all was that we ordered a drink before the meal, it took very long time before the drink came, and almost directly after that they came with the food too, so we were sitting there with our food, our drink and our wine, ... The whole evening was strange, bad service, ignorance, ... that's the worst (N41).

Poor hygiene was named in several cases where for example insects or hair were found in the guests' food. The guests most often reacted with shock and left the restaurant immediately.

The frequent drivers – the physical restaurant environment

This main category describes how guests' experiences are influenced by details in the servicescape. The subcategories, described in Table III, are comparable to the categories used by Bitner (1992) apart from the subcategory concerning the exterior and the subcategory referring to people in the environment. The exterior is described as the landscape outside, the view or the built environment outside the restaurant. People as part of the servicescape are described as other customers just being there, being seated too close to other groups, employees wearing a eye-catching uniform, etc.

Both of these subcategories describe aspects that are not in total control of the restaurant company.

Frequent drivers of guests' favourable experiences were interior and exterior aspects, which in some cases were described in detail. Also, the physical context outside the restaurant – the exterior – experienced before, under and after the stay at the restaurant, was described as influencing guests' experiences. The following extract illustrates an unfavourable experience evoked by the servicescape outside the restaurant, which became positive when the guests finally entered the restaurant.

I took them to the restaurant, it started actually ... when we were standing in this little elevator ... bringing us up to XY, and I thought that I had chosen the wrong place, it was a shaky elevator, and when we arrived upstairs and I saw in their faces that this elevator is a somewhat unusual entrance to a restaurant ... we were a little concerned when we were rattling in this elevator, and thought Jesus, why didn't we check the restaurant more thoroughly, we only heard about it. When we arrived upstairs we met an enormously beautiful sundown over the city. When we entered the restaurant milieu they said, wow fantastic ... (A23).

Interviewees described that people in the physical environment could mean a lot for their experiences. A female interviewee described how important other guests at the restaurant at the airport are for her. However in her hometown she feels uncomfortable to eat out at restaurants because she feels observed by other guests (who know her), which is shown in the next extract.

It is the atmosphere, the environment as a whole, first that there are people sitting out there, eating at their tables, the murmuring, even though I do not know people here (at the airport). It means a lot to me that ordinary people go out and eat, talk to each other, not this bawling we have where we come from, we can't go out and eat where we live (A20).

Sensory aspects such as the level of music which could contribute to having a good conversation or, conversely, making guests feel they were unwanted, were named in different cases as drivers of customer experiences. This is shown in the following extracts.

And then they started to play very loud music, because they wanted us to leave, they wanted to change the clientele (A67).

The first impression was that the music was a little too loud, however it seemed that they had carefully planned the room ... it was a lot of music, little happening and at the same time it was quiet enough for two people to talk (N25).

The less frequent drivers

Here the less frequent drivers – the restaurant, the price and payment, the atmosphere, and the guest and the occasion are described. Drivers in the main category *the restaurant* concern customers' experiences of the restaurants, its location, its name and the restaurant owner. These comments were not relevant for further analysis in this stage, as the purpose of the study was not to describe and classify restaurants. The drivers in the category price and payment procedure show that the price does matter. Price refers to the experience of the relationship between the cost and quality of food or between the cost and the total offering. In addition the experience of how smooth the

payment procedure worked despite, e.g. guests' wishes to split the bill influenced guests' experiences.

The main category atmosphere as a driver is related to different facet of the experience. It is described as a personal synthesis of what happened around the guest. Environmental aspects have been most important, followed by people and behaviour and the situation. The descriptions of atmosphere are abstract and descriptive terms such as pleasant, cosy, familiar, homelike, cosmopolitan, sterile and cold or luxurious and they are related to something less abstract – such as details in the environment or the people working at the restaurant. Atmosphere as a less frequent driver of favourable experiences was described in a few cases.

The main category the guest as a less frequent driver of favourable and unfavourable experiences refers to the guest as a contributor to the own restaurant experience. Interviewees often related their narratives to earlier experiences when they described the restaurant and what happened there – either own earlier experiences own or earlier experiences told by others. Experience, memory and expectation often occur at the same time in the narratives and often they are interrelated. Memories from earlier experiences may play a crucial role in customers' assessment of the focal service experience, which is formed during a dialectic process. Customers' earlier experiences and not only the more cognitive-related service expectations must be included when trying to understand the customers' service experiences formation. This main category shows that guests have a personal related pre-knowledge and pre-experience when arriving at a restaurant. How customers are influenced by expectations is illustrated in the narrative about the elevator earlier in this section. The unusual elevator makes them feel unsure about their expectations. The *occasion* as a less frequent driver of favourable experiences refers to the guests' company and the situation at the moment.

Discussion

This study has identified, portrayed and analysed the prerequisites for, and the frequent and less frequent drivers of customer service experiences, as described by customers in their own words – the voice of the customer. Both favourable and unfavourable experiences are considered. The results are described by distinguishing the drivers through the main and subcategories and by illustrations through text extracts from the narratives. The narratives include details about customers' service experiences and also feelings and reactions. This is in contrast to previous research, which has focused on measurement of customers' perception of service quality attributes which are mainly cognitive evaluations of the outcome of a service process. Further the study concerns the overall customer experience, including both aspects concerning the social and physical environment and including both cognitive and emotional aspects.

The results show clearly the multidimensionality of a customer experience as shown in earlier research (Holbrook, 2006; Grönroos, 1990; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). In the following sections the frequent drivers, social interactions, the core service and the physical environment will be discussed, followed by some other findings. Suggestions, which may be useful to managers, are made and limitations are discussed and suggestions are made for further research.

Social interactions is one of the frequent drivers of customer experiences as shown in this study. The subcategories describe the types of social interactions that occur

during favourable and unfavourable customer experiences. It could be stated that restaurant customers interact continuously with employees throughout the whole stay, but customers also interact with each other. Then the restaurant has little control over the experience. Customers interact actively, for example, through singing together and sometimes more indirectly through other customers' presence. These types of interactions can both destroy or contribute to customer experiences; therefore it is important to understand the mechanisms beyond. However when these social interactions occur in the process and what the experience means to the customers (Carù and Cova, 2007; Gupta and Vajic, 2000) could not be shown.

The core service – food and beverages – is also one of the frequent drivers. It could be stated that food and beverages play an important role for customer experiences and that customers have clear ideas about food quality, both concerning simple dishes, such as bread and fried pork, and complex meals. The core service seems to delight customers when something unexpected or extraordinary happens, for example when a little extra dish is served or when the restaurant does not have a written menu. They notice when the quality of food is not in line with the expected service level of the restaurant, they pay attention to the time it takes to be served and also to eat as well as it is important that the menu is adequate to the expectations and situation. When hygiene is defective they react most often by leaving the restaurant immediately. A number of the subcategories describe what is served, which could be compared to the technical dimension described by Grönroos (1990). These different aspects of the core service illustrate what is important for customers' experiences. However what food and beverages mean for customers' restaurant experiences was only shown to a little extent.

Relating the findings to the frameworks of the physical environment, the present study suggests social aspects concerning other guests and employees and the exterior, usually out of the control of the restaurant company, as two additional dimensions to the framework of servicescape (Bitner, 1992). The social aspect deepens the framework of the experience room (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005) as interviewees' descriptions of customer involvement such as different types of self-service. The physical environment, outside the restaurant, is described as a part of the servicescape; we may label it the service infrastructure, and it is not included in the servicescape framework, nor in the experience room model (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005). However, it has a remarkable influence on customer experiences as it was illustrated earlier in the text. In addition Hirschman and Holbrook's (1982) framework of hedonic consumption is a complementary tool to describe customer reactions on sensory stimuli from the physical environment, which was illustrated through the customers' reaction on the somewhat unusual elevator bringing the guests up to a restaurant. As most empirical studies are conducted in the retail context or are conceptual, this study contributes with new knowledge to the customer-environment interaction in a high-contact service environment – the restaurant context.

So far the frequent drivers of customer experiences have been discussed. When regarding every narrative as a whole, the service process and the dynamics of constant interactions with the customer in the centre become visible. Thus Holbrook's description of "an interactive relativistic preference experience" (Holbrook, 2006, p. 212) is supported by the extracts presented. Sometimes the processes start already before arriving (see the elevator extract labelled A23) and end after a walk back to the guests'

hotel, or even later, when the host and guests meet again and recall their special restaurant experience, "... they really liked the restaurant and the food and they referred to this restaurant visit several times afterwards" (A23). It is obvious that the restaurant is not in control of all aspects, e.g. the exterior experienced on arrival and after having left and the guest-guest interactions. On the other hand, the restaurant management is in control over the interior details and the core service and partly over the dialogue between the employees and the guests.

The findings contribute to the debate on SDL (Schembri, 2006; Vargo and Lush, 2004) through the focus on customer experience. The extracts from the narratives illustrate the customer as a resource (operant) (Vargo and Lush, 2004) and as an actor, who is involved when the service is co-created through interactions with the provider (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; Gupta and Vajic, 2000). Accordingly the role of the customer changes from being a person in the audience to who something is done, to being an actor. A consequence of this finding is that the role of management changes to be the provider the prerequisites and frontline employees need to support customers when they act. Further the dynamic interactions (directed by the drivers) result in value in use (value in context), or a customer experience, favourable or unfavourable. This in turn corresponds to Holbrook's (2006) theoretical description of how consumer value/a customer experience emerges – through dynamic processes of interactions. However to understand the processes of a customer experience and the interactions between the drivers and between drivers and customers, further analysis of the material would be necessary.

Other findings

The price – which refers to the cost in relation to what the customer gets – was only relevant as a driver in a few cases in this study, which is in accordance with Tucci and Talaga's (2000) result. A reason for this result could be that the interviewees in this study have not been asked specifically about price and quality and their sensitivity for the price level.

The results of this study show that the atmosphere, as seen from the customer's point of view, is a kind of personal synthesis of what happened during the stay, related to the aspects which are most important for the customer in that special situation, e.g. the physical environment or the persons around the table. However the views on atmosphere are different in the literature, as atmosphere is often regarded as almost identical with the physical environment (Edwards and Gustafsson, 2008) or as the result of the interaction between the individual and the environment (Heide and Grønhaug, 2006). These findings, seen from the customer perspective, should be considered in future research on atmosphere.

Summary of the research contributions

Referring to the aim of this study which was to identify, portray and analyse the frequent drivers of customer service experiences as described by customers in their own words – the voice of the customer, the main contributions of the paper will be discussed. The paper contributes to the field of service research by moving from general overall descriptions of customer service experiences scoring a service on a number of attributes (as used in SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985)) to customers' descriptions of drivers of their service experiences in the customers' own words. In

addition a distinction is made between the frequent and less frequent drivers of customer service experiences. The descriptions point out that the customer experience does not take place in isolation but in interaction with other people, which leads to the next contribution. The study illustrates the complexity and multidimensionality of customer experiences and extends this part of knowledge by descriptions of the process character of customers' individual experiences which include continuous dynamic interactions. This contribution is supported by the concept of customer value as "an interactive relativistic preference experience" according to Holbrook (2006). Finally by focusing on the customer experience, the description of the dynamic interactions between the drivers involved with the customer as an actor in the centre of interactions, the study makes a contribution to SDL (Vargo and Lush, 2004).

Managerial implications

We have shown and analysed the complexity and dynamism of a customer service experience in a restaurant context, with the social interactions, the core product and the physical environment as the frequent drivers of customers' favourable and unfavourable experiences. The customer interacts in a dynamic process with the drivers and vice versa as an active co-creator. For restaurant managers the results indicate the value of investing a great effort in understanding the complexity of interactions, especially between the customer and the frequent drivers in order to find ways of how to direct the interactions together with their customers. As contact employees play a crucial role in this process of interactions, both as dialogue partner and a support to the customer and as a marketer (Grönroos, 2006) for the restaurant company, the essence of recruiting, employee education and training and especially service employees' authority and the role they play must be rethought. The customers' service experience, is much more complex, than just being seated, getting the menu, making the orders, being served, and paying the bill.

Limitations of the study and further research

Our findings have some limitations. Owing to the method used only exceptional experiences are reported by the interviewees – not everyday experiences. The grade of criticality of the experiences has not been further examined, which means that the criticality the interviewees told was accepted. The incidents collected, show a great variation, even though not all of them could be assessed as being very critical for the relationship between customers and restaurants. Some of them would not be critical at all for us, but have been so for the interviewees. This shows that we are different. In addition only a Swedish context was studied and the study concerns only the restaurant context, which is a high-contact service. However due to the number of incidents collected, the broad and varying background of interviewees, a solid theoretical bases and the open presentation of details about the process of the study, we consider the findings to be applicable in other service contexts where customers and employees interact face-to-face during the service experience. Due to the careful description of details from this study, readers (practitioners and researchers) are able to find out themselves to which extent the results could be applied in their special context (Kvale, 2004). Further the CIT is criticised for not taking the process character of services into consideration (Stauss and Weinlich, 1996), both when the incidents are collected and when they are analysed. However the narratives show the process

character of services, which offers the opportunity to catch this important part through appropriate analysis of the material.

The present study shows the dimensions of the drivers of customers' favourable and unfavourable restaurant experiences. It is also shown in the extracts that interactions occur continuously between the customer and the drivers throughout the whole process of the customer service experience. However, further research is needed to explore and deepen the understanding of the nature of drivers and their interdependency, the role they play for the customer experiences, the start and end of the experience, who is in control of the driver in a specific situation and a typology of the most common and most unusual situations. This would give a more holistic picture of customer experiences. Concerning the frameworks of the physical environment, further research focusing on the role the servicescape plays for customer experiences would give a more detailed understanding of how to treat human aspects and exterior aspects in these frameworks. This additional knowledge could be an important contribution to the design of the prerequisites of favourable customer experiences.

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