



Characterising the concept of service experience

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Characterising
service
experience

367

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review the characterisation of the concept of service experience in service marketing research.

Design/methodology/approach – Using content analysis, 30 articles and two books published in the period from 2005 to 2007 are analysed.

Findings – Three characterisations of the concept of service experience are identified in the literature review: phenomenological service experience (which relates to the value discussion in service-dominant logic and interpretative consumer research); process-based service experience (which relates to understanding service as a sequential process); and outcome-based service experience (which relates to understanding service experience as one element in models of service linking a number of variables or attributes to various outcomes).

Research limitations/implications – To facilitate meaningful research in this area, it is important that researchers critically consider the nature of the concept of service experience in terms of who experiences it, the scope, content, and context of the service experience, and how service experience relates to other concepts, such as value.

Originality/value – No systematic literature review of the characterisation of the concept of service experience has previously been undertaken.

Keywords Service experience, Service marketing, Service management, Service-dominant logic, Content analysis

Paper type Literature review

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1. Introduction

The concept of “service experience” has been described as the core of the service offering and service design (Zomerdijs and Voss, 2010); as such, it is a key concept in the emerging paradigm of service-dominant logic (S-D logic), which regards the service experience as the basis of all business (Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Schembri, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

Holbrook and Hirschman’s (1982, p. 132) pioneering article on the service experience characterised the concept in experiential and phenomenological terms, which was in accordance with the authors’ view of consumption as: “... primarily [a] subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria”. Twenty years later, Carù and Cova (2003) observed that the concept of service experience has subsequently been characterised, often somewhat loosely, in a wide variety of ways – although most authors continued to restrict the use of the term to specific kinds of service experience, such as hedonic consumption.

Although there is widespread contemporary agreement on the importance of the concept of service experience in marketing, it is apparent that there are divergent views on how it should be characterised. Indeed, no systematic review of the literature on the concept of service experience has yet been published. The present paper seeks to fill this gap in the literature by undertaking a systematic review and analysis of how the concept



of service experience has been characterised in the contemporary service marketing literature. In doing so, this paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How has the concept of service experience been characterised in the recent literature?

RQ2. How do these various characterisations of service experience relate to previous research in the fields of service marketing and management?

In using the term “characterisation”, this study draws on Hart’s (2005) typology of how concepts can be characterised. To paraphrase Hart (2005), the questions to be addressed in any characterisation are:

- What is it? (which is an ontological question).
- What can be accepted as evidence about it? (which is an epistemological question).
- What techniques should be adopted for collecting data about it? (which is a methodological question).

The present study therefore examines the way in which the contemporary literature characterises the concept of “service experience” in terms of its scope and content, its context, the methods used to examine it, and the subject of the experience (that is, the person who experiences it).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section discusses experience as a general concept. The sample and methodology adopted in the literature review are then described. The paper then presents the findings with regard to a proposed three-fold typology of characterisations of the concept of “service experience”. The paper then describes how these three types of service experience relate to other key concepts in the research literature on service marketing and management. The paper concludes with a discussion of the conclusions and implications of the study for future studies of the concept of service experience.

2. Experience as a general concept

English dictionaries (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2003; *Webster’s Dictionary*, 2001) use various words to characterise the term “experience” – including an “event”, a “process”, a “phenomenon”, or a “change”. The subject of such an experience can be an individual, a community, a nation, or even humankind as a whole. Moreover, the experience can be “real” and physical, or “virtual” and observed, or perhaps a holistic phenomenon that combines both “real” and “virtual” elements. It can also be a single event or a process of events. The wide variation that is apparent in these dictionary characterisations indicates that the notion of “experience”, at least in the English language, varies in accordance with different contexts and circumstances.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that some languages, such as German, differentiate between:

- events or occurrences that are “impressive” or have a hedonic connotation (which are designated by the word *Erlebnis* in German); and
- experiences that involve “practical contact” and acquired knowledge or skills (which are designated by the word *Erfahrung* in German).

In contrast to this sort of differentiation, English (and French) use only one word to cover both perceptual experiences and actual lived experience.

These brief reflections on the nature of “experience” have implications for any review of the literature on service experience because they suggest that a service experience can be understood as a “hedonic impression” (perhaps even imaginary) or as a “practical contact” (consisting of observable facts or events). Moreover, from a methodological point of view, it would seem to be relevant whether the subject of an experience is posited in a given research study as an individual in a specific situation, or whether the study posits service experience as an aggregated, generalisable experience of multiple respondents.

These overarching ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues are taken into account in the literature review presented in this paper.

3. Methodology

3.1 *General principles of the methodology*

In general, terms, the methodology of this review followed the guidelines provided by Gremler (2004) and Tähtinen and Halinen (2002). In doing so, the analysis utilised the methods of content analysis, which is recognised as being suitable for systematically evaluating the symbolic content of any type of recorded communication (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991).

3.2 *Sample and preliminary analysis*

The studies for review in this study were gathered in two phases. The first phase gathered 54 full scientific articles in the domain of service marketing from 1 January 2005 to 31 December 2007. The articles were identified in the databases of ABI/Proquest, Business Source EBSCO, and Emerald. The criterion for the initial search was the presence of the word “experience” in the title of the article. Additional criteria were the words “service” in the citation and abstract and “marketing” in the citation and document text (in the case of the ABI/Proquest database), and the words “service” and “marketing” in the abstract (in the case of the EBSCO and Emerald databases). (These differences in search criteria in the various databases reflected the search options available in each database.)

The 54 articles identified by these criteria were read through twice, before being coded in a preliminary content analysis. This initial analysis divided the articles into two main categories:

- (1) Those that provided a specific objective characterisation of the concept of “service experience”.
- (2) Those that referred to “service experience” in more general and vague terms suggestive of “knowing” or “learning”.

It was, perhaps, somewhat surprising to find that 28 of the 54 articles fell into the second category – even though the word “experience” was explicitly mentioned in the titles of the articles. Following this preliminary content analysis, the 28 articles that failed to characterise the concept of service experience in explicit terms were excluded from further analysis.

In view of the relative lack of explicit characterisations in the initial sample, further studies from the literature were sought in the second phase of selection. The criterion for these additional references was that they must have made important and respected

contributions to academic study of the concept of service experience. This was determined in part by the frequency of citation of certain authors in the original sample of articles, which led to the addition of Arnould and Price (1993) (cited five times) and Pine and Gilmore (1999) (cited three times). Other references that were added on the basis of their acknowledged importance were:

- Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) and Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) (because of their influence in characterising service experience as the *locus* of business and consumption).
- Schembri (2006) and Vargo and Lusch (2008) (as key contributions regarding the phenomenon of service experience in S-D logic).

As a result of these two phases of selection, the final sample for further analysis consisted of 30 articles and two books. It was apparent that articles on service experience have been published in a variety of journals, and that no journal has dedicated itself to this subject. Indeed, only one journal had published more than two articles with the specific word “experience” in their titles; this was the *Journal of Service Management* (previously *International Journal of Service Industry Management*), which has published four such articles.

3.3 Substantive content analysis

Further content analysis was performed on the 30 articles and two books with a view to characterising the concept of “service experience”. In doing so, all of the studies were read thoroughly twice before the characterisations of “service experience” were recorded in the words of the authors. These characterisations were then coded in accordance with Hart’s (2005, p. 49) typology of characterisations:

- What is considered to be “service experience” (i.e. an ontological characterisation).
- What can be accepted as data of “service experience” (i.e. an epistemological characterisation).
- How such data about “service experience” can be collected (i.e. a methodological characterisation).

As a result of this process, three categorisations of the concept of “service experience” emerged from the sample of literature being analysed. For the purposes of the present study, these were designated as:

- “phenomenological” characterisations;
- “process-based” characterisations; and
- “outcome-based” characterisations.

Specific criteria were developed for each of these categorisations, and each of the sample publications was tested against these criteria. These criteria can be summarised as follows:

(1) Phenomenological characterisations:

- whether the authors explicitly used the term “phenomenon” (or “phenomenological”) in their characterisation, or referred to authors who have characterised service experience as a “phenomenon”;

- whether the service experience was understood as a holistic phenomenon, which is specific to an individual in the context of a specific event.
- (2) Process-based characterisations:
 - whether the authors explicitly used the term “process” in their characterisation, or referred to authors who have characterised service experience as a “process”; and
 - whether the characterisation focused on transformation or change within the process.
- (3) Outcome-based characterisations:
 - whether the authors explicitly characterised service experience in terms of a causal model in which the outcomes (and/or antecedents) of experience are measured, or experience is seen as a moderator of other relationships; and
 - whether the scope of the service experience depended on measurable attributes and variables.

4. Findings

4.1 *Phenomenological characterisations of service experience*

The analysis revealed that 16 journal articles and two books characterised service experience in phenomenological terms (in accordance with the criteria noted above). These 18 studies are listed in Table I. These characterisations were all in accordance with Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, p. 132), who described such service experiences as a: “... primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses and aesthetic criteria”.

4.1.1 Scope and context of phenomenological characterisations. The scope of the service experience in these phenomenological characterisations was the subjective experience of the service phenomenon, which Pine and Gilmore (1999) have characterised as the foundation of all business. Within this category of conceptualisations (Table I), Schembri (2006) has influenced S-D logic by encouraging a phenomenological and experiential approach; indeed, Vargo and Lusch (2008) adopted this approach in relation to value co-creation in the foundational premises of S-D logic. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) emphasised the co-creation of service experience from a strategic management perspective. Other authors in this category (Berry and Carbone, 2007; Millard, 2006; Mosley, 2007; Rondeau, 2005) have discussed the phenomenon of service experience in different contexts – such as loyalty, the “wow-factor”, total customer experience, and brands.

In interpretive and hermeneutic studies, the content of phenomenological service experiences is assumed to be specific to an individual and situation. However, an important trigger is interpersonal interaction. This means that experiences are not only subjective but also relational, social, and inter-subjective (Pullman and Gross, 2004).

This category, which represents the origin of the research on service experience, has been criticised for focusing on only one type of service experience – hedonic service experience (Carù and Cova, 2003). In this regard, the view of Vargo and Lusch (2008, p. 9) is interesting because they chose to use the word “phenomenological” (in preference to “experiential”) to avoid what they called the “Disneyworld event” in discussions of service experience. In explaining their position, Vargo and Lusch (2008) indicated that

Table I.
Phenomenological
characterisations of
service experience

Author(s), year	Characterisation of the concept of service experience	Setting	Conceptual/empirical
Arnould and Price (1993) ^a Berry and Carbone (2007)	Hedonic, extraordinary. Newness of perception and process and high levels of emotional intensity Customers' total experience, experience clues. "An experience is inherent; a positive experience is not. Customers consciously and unconsciously filter a baggage of clues, in the form of experiences, and organise them into sets of impressions – some rational and others more emotional. Anything perceived or sensed – or conspicuous in its absence – is an experience clue" (p. 27) Experience quality as a phenomenon integrated into a mathematical model of consumer (not organisational) purchase behaviour (p. 1812) Artistic experience is a flow experience, with some transformation in the subject (p. 40, referring to Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990) Referring to Pine and Gilmore (1999)	White water river-rafting, extraordinary experience. Customers and river guides To build loyalty through experience management. Customers (+ humanic clues come from the behaviour and appearance of service providers). Versatile service settings mentioned as examples	Empirical multiple methods Conceptual
Bolton <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Experience quality as a phenomenon integrated into a mathematical model of consumer (not organisational) purchase behaviour (p. 1812)	B2B marketing of high-tech systems in business markets in Germany and the UK. 143 companies	Empirical database analysis
Carù and Cova (2005)	Artistic experience is a flow experience, with some transformation in the subject (p. 40, referring to Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990)	Individual customer's artistic experiences in classical music concerts. Nine customers	Empirical survey and content and structure analysis
Chen <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Referring to Pine and Gilmore (1999)	A study of customers and vendors in the C2C electronic market, eBay, and Taobao in China (two case companies). Marketing and social perspective in an experience-seeking social marketplace The individual spectator's (customer's) experience at a baseball sporting event. 831 surveys: 376 at the baseball game and 455 at the arena football game	Empirical case study, and multi-methods
Greenwell <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Overall experience Howatt and Murray (2002)	Experiential view regards the consumption experience "as a phenomenon directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings, and fun" (p. 132)	Empirical, qualitative, questionnaires, CIT, and content analysis
Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) ^a	"Experiential perspective is phenomenological in spirit and regards consumption as a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria" (p. 132). Consumption experience can be seen as a flow		Conceptual

(continued)

Author(s), year	Characterisation of the concept of service experience	Setting	Conceptual/empirical
Meyer and Schwager (2007)	"Customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company. Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representations of a company's products, services, or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticism, advertising, news reports, reviews, and so forth." Total customer experience (TCE) Minocha <i>et al.</i> (2003)	"Companies that systematically monitor customer experience can take important steps to improve it – and their bottom line" (p. 117)	Conceptual
Millard (2006)	Holistic view of the total customer experience (referring to Meyer and Schwager, 2007, p. 125). Brand experience and customer and employer experience	Introduces guidelines in how organisations can achieve effective customer experiences across all contact channels. The "wow" factor	Conceptual
Mosley (2007)	"Consumption experiences as emotion-drenched" (p. 18, referring to O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2003; Elliott, 1998)	Managing the link between brand, organisational culture and customer experience. Embedding the brand in the total employee experience. Customer experience relies on interpersonal interactions	Conceptual
O'Donohoe and Turley (2007)	Customer expectations of a positive banking experience compared with perceived experience (p. 142)	Experiences of 10 front-line employees in response to service failure with people who came to the newspaper office or telephoned to insert an In Memoriam	Empirical interviews
O'Loughlin and Szmagin (2005)	TCE (total customer experience) in e-shopping	In-depth interviews with financial service managers and experts in the Irish financial service sector	Empirical in-depth interviews
Petre <i>et al.</i> (2006)		Integrating HCI (human-computer interaction) and CRM (customer relationship management) strategies in the design of e-commerce. Twelve voluntary customers	Empirical iterative progression

(continued)

Table I.

Table I.

Author(s), year	Characterisation of the concept of service experience	Setting	Conceptual/empirical
Pine and Gilmore (1999) ^a	"Experiences are events that engage individuals in a personal way and derive from the individual's prior state of mind and being" (p. 12). Experience has four realms (entertainment, educational, aesthetic, and escapist); the richest experiences include aspects of all of them (pp. 29-43)	Work is theatre, and every business is a stage. Characterises the role of customers and service provider representatives in the experience economy	Conceptual with case examples
Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) ^a	Personalised experience is unique to each individual consumer. Co-creation experience takes place in individual-centric experience networks. Linked to learning process and change	Customers and service provider representatives experience individually and in co-creation within experience networks. Linked to value co-creation	Conceptual with case examples
Rondeau (2005)	Direct and indirect brand experiences (referring to Dubberly, 2000). "A good experience translates to good brand perception" (p. 62, referring to Spool, 1998)	Customer and employee brand experience. Mobile sports application of Major League Baseball for mobile phones and iPods	Conceptual
Schembri (2006) ^a	"Products, whether they are predominantly goods or services, are essentially experiences." (p. 385). Customer service experience is a holistic, perceived phenomenon that is always subjective, case specific and personal	Services are holistic experiences rather than process or outcome components (p. 388). "Customer and service are inseparable entities and the customer's experience is the focus" (p. 389)	Conceptual
Vargo and Lusch (2008) ^a	"To the extent that the word experience is intended in a phenomenological sense, we are comfortable with the terms being used interchangeably, as we have done on a number of occasions" (p. 9). The word experience includes previous interaction	S-D logic foundational premise modifications and additions	Conceptual
Total 18			

Notes: Articles and books that characterise service experience as a phenomenon; articles and books marked with ^a are from the additional data collection

they were comfortable using the terms “phenomenological” and “experiential” interchangeably, but only if the word “experience” is used in a phenomenological sense.

Whatever the merits of this semantic debate, it is nonetheless true that it was interest in hedonic service experiences that originally placed the notion of customer service experience under a research spotlight. For example, Arnould and Price (1993) focused on extraordinary hedonic service experiences in river rafting, which entails high levels of emotional intensity. However, other types of service settings are also included in this category – such as high-tech systems, e-commerce, and financial services (Table I).

Finally, in characterising service experience as a phenomenon, it is interesting to note that a significant proportion (10 of 18) of the articles in this category lacked an empirical study. Nevertheless, despite the relative scarcity of empirical studies in this category, many of the conceptual studies are key articles that are frequently referred to in the service experience literature.

4.1.2 Subject of phenomenological characterisations. Most of the articles that approach service experience as a phenomenon refer to the customer as the subject of service experience. In this regard, Meyer and Schwager (2007, pp. 118-19) defined customer experience as:

[...] the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company [...] [including] unplanned encounters with representatives of a company's products, services, or brands [...] word-of-mouth recommendations or criticism, advertising, news reports, reviews, and so forth.

However, some authors have examined subjects other than customers. For example, O'Donohoe and Turley (2007) focused on service representatives as the subject of the experience. Other authors in this category (Arnould and Price, 1993; Berry and Carbone, 2007; Millard, 2006; Mosley, 2007) have also endorsed the view that, in addition to customers, service-provider representatives also experience the service.

Although the phenomenological approach to service experience is essentially individual, the social aspects of the subject have assumed increasing significance. For example, although S-D logic emphasises individually perceived experience that is subjective, case-specific, and context-specific, the paradigm of S-D logic acknowledges that this takes place in co-creation with other people in social-experience networks, where all individuals are experiencing subjects (Schembri, 2006). In this regard, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) described personalised service experiences occurring through heterogeneous interactions in a multi-stakeholder network. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) thus posited service experience as occurring in a multi-stake network, but with every individual who interacts with the company experiencing the service in his or her individual way.

4.1.3 Summary of phenomenological characterisations. In summary, the main focus of the phenomenological characterisation of the service experience is on the individual experiences – which are usually internal, subjective, event-specific, and context-specific. However, even if the focus has traditionally been on the individual, studies in this category have increasingly recognised that the experience is also social – because people do not live in isolation.

The connection with the service can be direct or indirect. The notion of an indirect connection refers to connections in which the individual has not been in contact with the service provider or used the service (Meyer and Schwager, 2007). Accordingly, service experience can be a practical encounter or an imaginary encounter.

The subjects of the service experience can be any relevant actors in the service phenomenon, including customers and service-provider representatives.

Finally, the context of phenomenological service experiences can include different kinds of events and service settings, despite the criticism that studies of the phenomenological service experience have tended to focus on hedonic services (Carù and Cova, 2003).

4.2 Process-based characterisations of service experience

The studies that characterised service experience as a process focused on the architectural elements of the service during the process of an action (Toivonen *et al.*, 2007). However, these elements did not always play their roles in a linear and sequential order. Process-based studies obviously emphasise the time element of the service experience, and most expressed this element in terms of “stages” or “phases”.

The seven studies that characterised the service experience in terms of process are listed in Table II.

4.2.1 Scope and content of process-based service experience. Some researchers in this category have emphasised its links with experiential learning theory, which holds that knowledge is created by transforming experience (Coffey and Wang, 2006; Hunter, 2007). Other authors in this category, such as Madsen and Turnbull (2006), have noted the link between process-based characterisations and the theory of experience. In this regard, Edvardsson *et al.* (2005a, p. 151) described service experience as “... a service process that creates the customer’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses, resulting in a mental mark, a memory”.

A majority of the articles in this category (four of seven) featured a service setting involving learning. Other settings included in this category included purchase and consumption experience, and lived and imaginary experience. Most of the studies focused on business-to-customer (B2C) dealings, although customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions on the internet were also studied (Hong-Youl and Perks, 2005).

All seven articles in this category were based on empirical studies of various kinds (including case studies, surveys, and action research).

4.2.2 Subject of process-based characterisations. The process-based characterisations of service experience emphasise individuals as active subjects of the experience. Three articles in this category (Coffey and Wang, 2006; Curran-Kelly, 2005; Madsen and Turnbull, 2006) focused on individual customer service experience, and two others (Bassi and Guido, 2006; Hong-Youl and Perks, 2005) analysed survey-based customer service experience. Hunter (2007) focused on the processes of student and client learning experiences, although they did comment on the role of service-provider representatives in managing the customers’ service experience. Edvardsson *et al.* (2005) also took into account the experience of service-provider representatives.

4.2.3 Summary of process-based characterisations. In summary, the main focus of the process-based characterisation of service experience is on the architectural elements of the service-experience process, which are often referred to as “phases” or “stages” of the service process. The chronological order of these elements is usually included in these characterisations of the service experience, and transformation or change (such as learning) is emphasised. The subject of the service experience is usually posited as a customer. The context of service experience in this category includes a variety of service settings.

Author(s), year	Characterisation of the concept of service experience	Setting	Conceptual/empirical
Bassi and Guido (2006)	Measuring customer satisfaction, from product performance to consumption experience	The consumption experience is a complex and articulated process and must be viewed as a complex phenomenon. Recalling or imagining the consumption experience of an article: convenience goods (washing machine detergents), shopping goods (shoes), and specialty/investment goods (cars) (p. 79)	Empirical survey of 50 consumers (convenience sample)
Coffey and Wang (2006)	Experience is characterised with an introduction and implementation of a service-learning project (referring to experiential learning, Kolb, 1984 and service-learning, Bringle and Hatcher, 1996, p. 119)	Service learning in an MBA integrative project course. An experience in China. Viewpoint, including a project example	Authors' view of a service learning project in China
Curran-Kelly (2005)	Learning experience (referring to McCann-Nelson <i>et al.</i> , 1995)	Undergraduate students. Using international student experiences to teach adaptation in global marketing	Empirical and case study
Edvardsson <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Service experience as "a service process that creates the customer's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses, resulting in a mental mark, a memory" (in line with Johnston and Clark, 2001, p. 515)	Stimulated pre-service experience in an IKEA experience room. Demonstrates how organisations can co-create value together with the customer (p. 149)	Empirical case study, observation, and interviews analysis
Hong-Youl and Perks (2005)	Brand experience is "a consumer's positive navigations (i.e. using web-based communities and participating in events) and perceptions (i.e. the attractiveness) of cookies, variety and uniqueness of visual displays and value for money) with a specific website" (p. 440)	Ninety online customers. The survey included different websites in South Korea: bookstores, Abata malls (web-chatting forums on service purchasing, such as hairstyle, t-shirt, and trousers), CD malls, and web travel agencies (p. 444). The study offers insights into the consumer's perception process for generating brand trust on the web.	Empirical survey-based method

(continued)

Table II.
Process-based
characterisations of
service experience

Author(s), year	Characterisation of the concept of service experience	Setting	Conceptual/empirical
Hunter (2007)	Academic service learning is "a method of student learning through active participation in organized experiences that meet community need" (referring to Perkins and Miller, 1994). "A credit bearing educational experience" (referring to Bringle and Hatcher, 1996, p. 88). ELT experiential learning theory is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984) or the "theory of experience"	Four students. The virtual student/client experience within a learning project in Blackboard (online delivery portal), live chats and discussion boards, teleconferences, phone calls, and e-mails among themselves and the client (company) (p. 89)	Empirical method, not named, a type of action research
Madsen and Turnbull (2006)	Academic service learning (McCarthy and Tucker, 1999) is a form of experiential learning (McCarthy and Tucker refer to Bringle and Hatcher, 1996, p. 725)	Learning experiences of 16 undergraduate business students in the United States of America	Empirical, qualitative interview project using the phenomenological approach, type of case study
Total 7			

4.3 Outcome-based characterisations of service experience

The articles in the outcome-based group characterised service as one element in models linking a number of variables or attributes to various outcomes. Table III lists the seven articles in this category.

4.3.1 Scope and content of outcome-based service experience. The treatment of service experience in the articles in this category varied from the broad examination of air travel experience conducted by Bel (2005) to narrower studies of a single attribute of service experience, such as the examination of cumulative online service experience by Holloway *et al.* (2005) and that of dining experience in a restaurant by Aurier and Siadou-Martin (2007). The outcomes of the service experience were measured through a variety of variables – such as pleasure variables (Bel, 2005), service quality (Flanagan *et al.*, 2005), and quality, value, satisfaction, and relationship quality (Aurier and Siadou-Martin, 2007). In some studies in this category, the outcomes were related to propositions concerning other variables, such as the ability of consumers to verify the validity and reliability of the services (Galetzka *et al.*, 2006). In many cases, there was also a focus on the antecedents of the service experience.

Compared with the other characterisations, the outcome-based characterisations adopted a somewhat simpler view of the service experience. The focus is on relationships affecting the outcomes of the service experience or how the service experience moderates other relationships. For example, several of the studies in this category (Doolin *et al.*, 2005; Galetzka *et al.*, 2006; Holloway *et al.*, 2005; Menon and Bansal, 2007) measured service experience in terms of such outcome variables as satisfaction and repurchase intentions, or how these outcomes might be influenced by other variables (such as emotions or risk perceptions). In such articles, the service experience itself was often not the focus of the study, and was thus not discussed in any great depth.

Most of the authors in this category (six of seven) focused on B2B interactions, although some also involve B2C dealings (Flanagan *et al.*, 2005). The articles in this characterisation typically presented an empirical study (Aurier and Siadou-Martin, 2007; Bel, 2005; Doolin *et al.*, 2005; Galetzka *et al.*, 2006; Holloway *et al.*, 2005; Menon and Bansal, 2007).

4.3.2 Subject of outcome-based characterisations. Because the articles in this category characterised the concept of service experience in terms of overall outcomes, they tended to posit the subject of the experience in terms of aggregated service experiences for multiple respondents. Moreover, all of the papers reviewed in this category focused on the experience of the customers, while ignoring the experience of individual service providers. In this category the service provider was usually considered only in aggregate terms (such as an organisation or a unit).

4.3.3 Summary of outcome-based characterisations. In summary, the outcome-based characterisations of service experience posit the experience as one element in a model linking a number of variables or attributes to outcomes. The focus is not on an individual person, but on the aggregated service experience of multiple respondents. The outcome-based characterisations usually focus on the immediate result, rather than a longitudinal process. The context of service experience includes different kinds of service settings.

5. Discussion

The RQ2 to be addressed in this study asked how the various characterisations of service experience (as identified above) relate to previous research. This question is addressed in the discussion that follows.

Table III.
Outcome-based
characterisations of
service experience

Author(s), year	Characterisation of the concept of service experience	Setting	Conceptual/empirical
Aurier and Siadoun-Martin (2007)	Focuses on the role of perceived justice during service purchase/consumption experiences. Relates service experience to causal links between perceived justice and service evaluation (perceived quality and value), satisfaction, and relationship quality (trust and commitment)	Dining experience at a restaurant	Empirical experiment, a scenario evaluation based on a script. 188 undergraduate students
Bel (2005)	Architectural elements of air travel experience	Customers' experience with air travel	Conceptual
Doolin <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Internet shopping experience related to perceived benefits and loss of social interaction (p. 72)	700 New Zealand Internet users, online purchasing behaviour	Empirical survey
Flanagan <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Contact with the service (p. 375). A set of elements that affect the service experience: accessibility, availability, communication, speed of response, empathy, attentiveness, commitment, care, courtesy, competence, commitment, action taken and encouragement (p. 381)	"Members of the public who had limited contact and a significant encounter with the police (such as being a victim of burglary) within the previous four months." (p. 377)	Empirical, four focus groups
Galetzka <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Experience attributes and experience services	Measuring service reliability and validity of search, experience and credence services	Empirical questionnaires with written scenarios, 118 customers (p. 271)
Holloway <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Cumulative online purchasing experience will moderate the relationships between variables in the online service failure/recovery encounter (p. 56, references to Mittal and Kamakura, 2001; Cadotte <i>et al.</i> , 1987; Olson and Dover, 1979; Parasuraman <i>et al.</i> , 1985)	Students from US universities	Empirical survey-based method, 16 imaginary customer online shopping experiences with the hypothetical shopping scenario
Menon and Bansal (2007)	Consumer perceptions of their experiences of social power during service consumption. Experience is related to consumer cognition, expectations, emotions and expressions (p. 90)	195 adult consumers of a range of services	Empirical, a self-administered survey with a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures
Total 7			

5.1 *Phenomenological service experience*

The phenomenological characterisation of service experience has not been the dominant research approach in traditional services marketing. However, empirical studies on phenomenological service experience can be found in the research streams of interpretative consumer research (Carù and Cova, 2005) and consumer culture theory (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Arnould and Price, 1993). Moreover, recent studies of S-D logic have introduced the concept of phenomenological service experience, although empirical studies are scarce (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Schembri, 2006).

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the literature on S-D logic affirms that all actors in a service experience are co-creators of value both individually and as a part of a social group (Gummesson, 2008; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Thus, notwithstanding the emphasis placed on the individual by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, p. 10), who emphasised the service experience as unique to each individual “at a specific point in time, in a specific location, in the context of a specific event”, the data of the service experience are simultaneously individual (intra-subjective) and social (inter-subjective) (Johns and Tyas, 1997; Goulding, 2005).

The hedonic service experience has inspired research in marketing and opened new research avenues that highlight the phenomenological service experience as the foundation for all business (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Gummesson, 2008; Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). However, hedonic service experience does not necessarily imply a solely phenomenological approach; rather, this study has shown that process- and outcome-based characterisations have contributed to understanding of the hedonic service experience (Aurier and Siadou-Martin, 2007).

5.2 *Process-based service experience*

The characterisation of service experience as a process reflects the way in which many researchers understand the nature of service *per se*. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Edvardsson *et al.* (2005), who asked 16 leading marketing scholars to characterise the concept of service, reported that a majority of respondents emphasised the process nature of service. This view sees service in terms of a process of phases (or stages) over time, with the service experience involving a transformation or a change (often related to learning) (Coffey and Wang, 2006; Hunter, 2007; Madsen and Turnbull, 2006; Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005).

5.3 *Outcome-based service experience*

As noted above, outcome-based characterisations of service experience posit service experience as one element in models linking a number of variables or attributes to various outcomes. This view of service experience is in accordance with other well-known concepts in service marketing and management – such as service quality, value, and satisfaction (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). The content and scope of outcome-based service experience varies in accordance with the variables and attributes used in any given study, and their theoretical foundation. The studies reviewed here mostly focused on the use of methodology, rather than discussing the foundations of the concepts.

It is also interesting to note that the papers reviewed in this category in the present study have, for the most part, explored the service experience of customers; in contrast, the service experience of other actors, such as the service providers, has been largely ignored and thus represents a gap in the literature.

Figure 1 and Table IV summarise the methodology and findings of the present study. The process (from characterisation to how the categories relate to previous research) is shown in Figure 1. The main features of the three characterisations are summarised in Table IV.

6. Conclusions and implications

Based on a systematic literature review, this study has suggested a three-fold typology for characterising the concept of service experience:

- (1) phenomenological characterisations;
- (2) process-based characterisations; and
- (3) outcome-based characterisations.

In addition, the study has indicated how the three types of characterisations relate to previous research.

It is not the intention of the study to suggest that the three characterisations are mutually exclusive; rather, the study has sought to identify the various ways in which the concept of service experience has actually been used by different authors in the literature. In doing so, the study recognises that the different characterisations of the concept represent different research traditions, different paradigms of service marketing and management, and even different understandings of the nature of knowledge itself. As such, the different characterisations are complementary, rather than being mutually exclusive.

The insights derived from this study have implications for researchers in this area. For example, when the focus is on the individual’s experiences of the service process, the findings of the present study suggest that analysis of the service experience should be

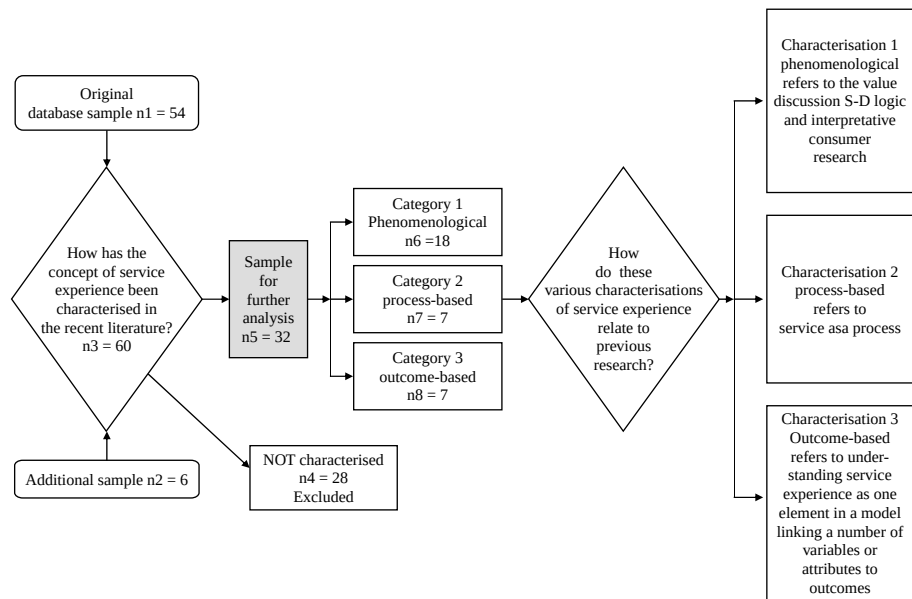


Figure 1.
Characterising service
experience: summary of
methodology and findings

	Phenomenological	Process-based	Outcome-based
Relates to:	S-D logic and interpretative consumer research	Service marketing that understands service as a process	Understanding service experience as part of a causal model in which either the outcomes and/or antecedents of experience are measured or in which experience is posited as a moderating variable
Scope and content of service experience	A subjective, event-specific, and context-specific phenomenon Simultaneously individual and social Can be a practical or imaginary encounter	Focuses on architectural elements (phases) and their order during the process of service	Understanding service experience as one element in a model linking a number of variables or attributes to outcomes
The context of service experience	Different kinds of events and service settings	Different kinds of phases and service settings	Different kinds of service settings
Methodology	Mostly conceptual	Varies	Mostly surveys
Relation to time	A subjective experience of the flow of time	Time and order of elements are usually included	Focuses on measuring the attributes or variables (rather than a longitudinal process)
Subject of experience	Any relevant actor in the service encounter	Usually a customer	Focus on the aggregate data of multiple customers

Table IV.
Comparison of different
types of characterisations

based on the phenomenological approach. In contrast, if the focus is on the elements (phases) of the process, the order in which they occur, and changes of service experience within a longitudinal aspect, it would seem that the process-based characterisation of service experience would be a more appropriate approach. However, given that the different characterisations complement each other, rather than being mutually exclusive, one or other of these characterisations might be applicable in other settings; for example, phenomenological research could provide a basis for new developments in process- and outcome-based research of service experience, or vice versa. As such, the different characterisations complement each other. Indeed, the findings of the study suggest that phenomenological research could provide a basis for new developments in process- and outcome-based research of service experience; and vice versa.

Like all studies, the present investigation has certain acknowledged limitations. First, the articles and books assessed in the literature review represent only a small sample of the vast number of publications that have treated the concept of service experience (in one way or another) over many years. By limiting itself to the period from 2005 to 2007, the study is able to provide only an overview of the huge number of articles that include the concept of service experience. Nonetheless, the study has the merit of having focused on relatively recent publications and on studies that have explicitly treated the concept of service experience (rather than merely noting it in passing). As such the insights gained from the study do have contemporary validity and applicability.

Second, it is acknowledged that the content analysis was relatively superficial; as such, it provides only a general categorisation without attempting any detailed analysis of the complex nature of many of the articles. Nonetheless, given that content analysis is widely used for systematically analysing texts with a definite purpose in mind (Silverman, 2005), the use of a relatively superficial content analysis in the present study for the purposes of addressing two specific research questions would seem to be valid.

For the future, the present study should encourage researchers to adopt a more critical approach to discussions about the concept of service experience and its relationship to other concepts, such as value. Such a critical approach will clarify and facilitate further research in this important area (Alvesson, 1994; Morgan, 2003; Skålen *et al.*, 2008). The characterisations developed in the present study are based on the specific research questions raised at the beginning of this study. The challenge for future studies is to develop a typology of the concept of service experience that is more multidimensional, and link the concept more closely with other important concepts in service marketing and management.

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