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Conceptualisation of the service experience by means of a literature review

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Abstract

Purpose – Service operations are currently growing in importance, with a consequent increase in academic interest in the matter. In this context, the purpose of this paper is to systematise the concept associated with the service experience by drawing from the definitions which have been established in the relevant scientific literature.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic search in the literature was conducted, aiming to identify the main articles, journals, references, and keywords on the subject of customer experience. Using bibliometric content and analysis a number of articles are analysed towards a concept of service experience.

Findings – The study verifies that service experience and service quality are distinct concepts that have to be analysed separately. The construction of this proposed concept has been oriented by content analysis of the reviewed articles. Dimensions and components that categorise this concept in a singular manner have been identified. The service experience, which can be thought of as a process, is composed of the interdependent and complementary dimensions of "predispositions", "interactions", and "reactions", which condition the perception of quality and affect current as well as future purchasing decisions. As a result of their strategic importance for service organisations, customer experiences therefore warrant careful analysis.

Research limitations/implications – This work is theoretical so empirical studies are necessary in order to validate or reject the proposed concept.

Originality/value – Very few systematic literature reviews of the characterisation and conceptualisation on service experience concept are available.

Keywords Service management, Service experience, Literature review, Bibliometrics

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

Service operations have been growing in importance in the contemporary world, with a consequent increase in academic interest in the subject (Chase and Apte, 2007). Heineke and Davis (2007) highlight the importance of this topic in confirming the interdependence between assets and services, i.e., the production and sale of products are generally associated with some type of service, such as transport, delivery, assembly, assistance,

replacement, or telemarketing. Moreover, there are no "pure" services or products, and their coexistence is evident in business relations at industrial, commercial, or service organisations (Bateson and Hoffman, 2008).

The complexity of studying services lies in their typical characteristics – intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity, and simultaneity – which have already been established in the literature (Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2005; Chase and Apte, 2007; Ladhari, 2009; Zehrer, 2009). Services possess a strong subjective character, which is difficult to assess. Simultaneity, in particular, means that service delivery and consumption occur at the same time, which creates a unique experience for each customer, conditions the perception of quality, and affects current and future purchasing decisions. Pine II and Gilmore (1998) note that a positive customer experience is a differentiation factor in the competitive positioning of organisations, and, for this reason, the service experience, either virtual or on-site, needs to be studied more deeply, with the intention of understanding its nature and creating theoretical bases for instruments of measurement and improvement.

Service quality, satisfaction, and service experience are distinct constructs, however, in some cases, complementary. Both professionals and academics often mistakenly use customer expectations to explain satisfaction and service quality. Service quality has ingredients of comparison with expectations of management patterns controlled by the supplier such as, time of service, courtesy, price, and other attributes, and does not require a direct experience to be perceived. Satisfaction is an affective response of client assessment in a particular transaction and compares the subjective experience lived with personal specifications of each client, because only participants can experience (Bowen and Clarke, 2002; Brunner-Sperdin and Peters, 2009; García and Picos, 2009; He and Song, 2009). The same service delivery provides a different service experience on each client. Nusair and Kandampully (2008) state that satisfaction is a continuous assessment inherent in the acquisition of service and consumer experience. In this context, the present study examines the idea of the service experience and suggests a specific concept for it based on the literature. The proposition of a concept that translates the broad meaning of the service experience may allow for future empirical work.

The contemporary literature (Baron and Harris, 2010; Johnson *et al.*, 2009; Johnston and Kong, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2011; Teng, 2011; Yi and Gong, 2009) explores the evaluation of the service experience by assessing either customer satisfaction or service quality. However, proposals that address the service experience itself as the central subject of analysis are scarce.

In analysing the service experience directly, this paper addresses the following research question:

RQ1. What is the service experience?

This question leads to the central proposition that the service experience is not just a consequence of service delivery. It also depends on other factors, such as the attributes of the involved players, the social, cultural, and environmental context, the way the service is rendered, and the nature of the service itself. There are, in fact, three typical characterisations, by which the scientific literature broaches the service experience (Helkkula, 2011), suggesting the possibility that these can be complimentary to each other: as the situations or phenomena that are experienced by customers, as operational processes, and as results or effects of the service rendering.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: the next section describes the research methods that were used. The results of a bibliometric study of selected articles

are then presented. The paper next presents findings with regard to the proposed concept as well as an explanation of the terms that make up the service experience. The final section provides the study's conclusions and implications for future work on the concept of the service experience.

2. Research methods

This investigation and analysis is based on literature that was obtained through a systematic bibliographic review that was conducted in three parts (Walsham, 2006; Levy and Ellis, 2006): article search and selection; analysis of the results (bibliometric description, content reading, and analysis); and documentation (construction of the service experience concept).

The premise of this work is that the service experience concept is anchored in a systemic vision of an organisation. It relies on the metaphor that an organisation is like an organism that interacts with its environment, and because of this suffers pressures and/or exercises influence in a dynamic and plural process (Caldas, 2005; Morgan *et al.*, 1996). The metaphor of service experience as a process naturally leads to a breakdown into three dimensions of analysis: entry requirements (inputs), transformation sub-processes, and results (outputs) (Andersen, 2007). The process approach also provides a structure that facilitates the analysis, control, management, and improvement of related activities and makes it possible to achieve, maintain, or perfect the performance of the business (Kumar *et al.*, 2008; Smart *et al.*, 2009; Beimborn and Joachim, 2011; Bititci *et al.*, 2011).

2.1 Article search, retrieval, and record

The first step in the research process was the selection of the databases, the keywords to be searched for in the articles, and the definition of publication date limits. The Scopus and Web of Science databases were searched for the keyword "service experience", without delimitations on the year of publication. These databases were chosen due to their importance as well as for their ability to provide wide article coverage in the area of management, thereby resulting in a significant number of articles for analysis. In addition, these two databases allow users to easily access and export article metadata for subsequent analysis. EndNote® software was used for metadata management, and Sci2Tool® and Guess® software were used for mapping and analysing citations and co-citations.

2.2 Descriptive analysis of the results

The analysis of the literature was divided into two parts: bibliometric analysis and content analysis. The first part is a descriptive evaluation of the publications conducted by analysing bibliometric indicators such as the most representative articles, keywords, journals, authors, and citations. The second part consists of analysing content, which was explicitly included in the writing of other researchers, as well as other latent or implicit attributes in these same works (Franco, 2007). In this way, the reading, analysis, and interpretation of the full texts were carried out in order to identify elements that could assist in the construction of the proposed service experience concept. The latter part also includes the organisation of the content into the dimensions of inputs, transformation processes, and outputs, according to the previously established metaphor.

2.3 Determination of the proposed service experience concept

In this phase of the study, texts on how the authors have defined or conceptualised the service experience were sought, regardless of whether they resorted to other

sources. To discuss these results, additional sources were used to make the concept more explicit when appropriate. Some dimensions of the concept were also identified; these were derived from a broader concept and categorised into more specific analysis criteria. The service experience can be broken down into components, according to their level of complexity. In the selection, analysis, and knowledge construction processes, a systemic concept was defined based on paradigms that are supported by the literature and can be tested empirically, as established by Campenhoudt and Quivy (2003). The concept was established through the analysis of the identified dimensions with the intent of incorporating essential aspects from the reviewed articles.

3. Descriptive results

This section presents the most relevant results of the bibliometric study on the service experience and also identifies the most relevant articles, journals, and keywords that were found. As shown in Figure 1, publications on this topic began to appear in 1991 and have been growing in number ever since, particularly over the last few years.

The number of publications increased sharply in 2004 and has continued to grow ever since, suggesting an increase in interest in this subject. Previously, there had been an increase in 1997, which can be explained by the publication of a special edition of the *Journal of Retailing*, on perspectives of excellence in services, which included articles by Grove and Fisk (1997) and Winsted (1997).

Concerning keywords, there is some proximity between studies on those on service experience and service quality (see Figure 2). The size of nodes in the figure represents the number of times that the keyword has been cited in the set of articles while the thicker line indicates that the keywords are co-cited in a larger number of articles. The two most common keywords present in the articles are "quality" and "satisfaction". They also appear in other composed keywords, such as customer satisfaction, service quality, consumer satisfaction, or customer service quality. The keywords "experience" and "service experience" appear only in articles from 2009 to 2011, which suggests the recent creation of more specific terminology concerning the service experience.

A portfolio of 70 publications was identified, with publication dates ranging from 1991 to 2011. The most cited articles, with an average of over five citations per year, are shown in Table I.

The most referenced articles from the portfolio are presented in Table II. Inthese articles, the idea that the service experience is a function of service quality is reinforced, but this is later shown to be false.
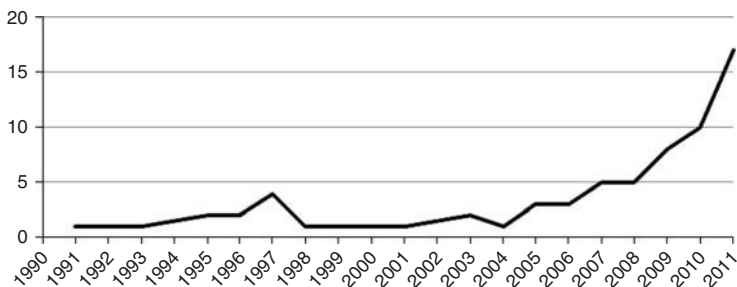
Figure 1.
Distribution of publications on service experience per year across the studied period
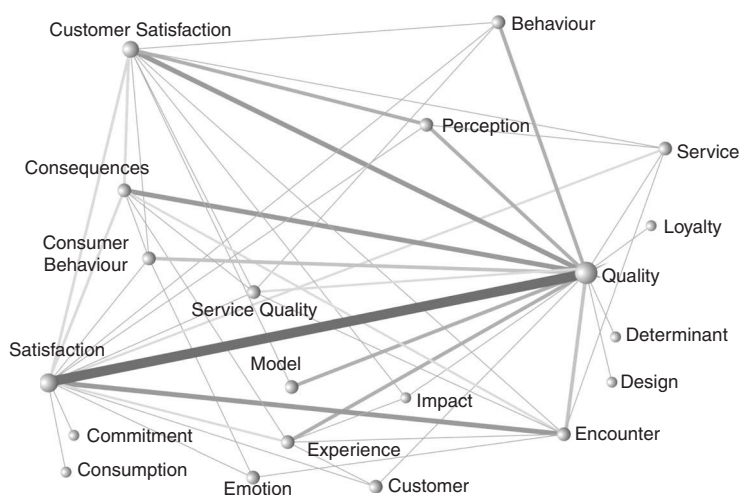
Figure 2.
Map of the keywords

Article	Number of citations
Edvardsson *et al.* (2005)	24
Froehle and Roth (2004)	50
Boshoff and Leong (1998)	30
Bitner *et al.* (1997)	73
Grove and Fisk (1997)	71
Winsted (1997)	66
Bettencourt and Gwinner (1996)	32
Johnston (1995)	35
Kingman-Brundage *et al.* (1995)	24
Hui and Bateson (1991)	169

Table I.
Portfolio articles
with the greatest
number of citations
in Web of Science

Article	Number of citations in Web of Science	Number of citations in the article portfolio
Parasuraman *et al.* (1988)	2,071	14
Parasuraman *et al.* (1985)	1,954	18
Cronin Jr and Taylor (1992)	1,018	17
Zeithaml *et al.* (1996)	987	13
Vargo and Lusch (2004)	790	14
Bitner *et al.* (1990)	712	31
Bitner (1992)	555	15

Table II.
Most utilised articles
as references in the
portfolio of articles

4. Conceptualisation of service experience

After the descriptive analysis, a more in-depth analysis of article content was carried out. The content analyses consisted of searching for concepts and approaches adopted by researchers on service experience. The content analysis was restricted to three sets of articles: the ones with the most citations in Web of Science, the most recent ones, and the ones most utilised as references.

One of the first issues identified in the literature is that service experience and service delivery are distinct concepts (Bryson and Taylor, 2010). Providing the service is an action for the customer, by the organisation, which incorporates the complex interconnections between people and infrastructure that are delivered through established processes (Kwortnik and Thompson, 2009). The experience, meanwhile, is singular to each customer; something unique which cannot be generalised.

Customer needs are inputs to the service experience, because the service experience is a phenomenon that is internally operated (Chang and Horng, 2010), in addition to the social, cultural, and environmental contexts in which the service delivery situation takes place (Allred and Money, 2010; Gross and Pullman, 2012). From this point of view, the customer is the locus at which the service experience is processed, not just a resource to be transformed. In the example of dental patients, their sensitivity to pain or fear of anaesthesia are predispositions that could make their experience more or less satisfactory and do not depend on the dentist's professional quality, the state of their teeth, or the environment in which this service is provided.

Some authors argue that the service experience occurs in the experienced situation (Voorhees et al., 2009; Allred and Money, 2010; Helkkula, 2011). Although it seems trivial to note the living character of the service experience, these authors maintain that the exprience is lived through and built on before, during, and after service delivery. For this reason, understanding the mechanisms driving these situations and creating ways of measuring them can lead to the creation of a competitive advantage for the organisation (Chen and Chen, 2010).

Based on the literature, a concept of service experience, including the process perspective, with its dimensions and components, was elaborated. The concept contains three dimensions, called "predispositions" (inputs), "interactions" (transformations), and "reactions" (outputs), within the metaphor of the service experience as a process (Table III). Service organisations have no control over the first and the last dimensions. These are inherent to the customer and may change according to the moment or situation. There is, however, the possibility that the company could influence these predispositions and reactions through marketing or interior design techniques (e.g. at shops) to produce positive behaviours in customers (Tosun et al., 2007). The service experience is a consequence of operations as well as organisational and personal characteristics (Brunner-Sperdin and Peters, 2009). In this sense, the experience

Concept	It is a cognitive, affective, and behavioural process, experienced during service delivery, which builds, solidifies or modifies the image of the organisation and influences clients' current or future purchasing decisions; mediated by people, infrastructure and technology; biased by client values and needs, the socio-cultural and environmental context, previous experiences and the nature and duration of the service operations				
Dimensions	Predispositions		Interactions		Reactions
Components	Socio-cultural context	⇨	Company staff	⇨	Behaviours
	Environmental context		Infrastructure		Feelings
	Preconceived images		Technology		Learnings
	Previous experiences		Duration of the event		Perception of value
	Personality traits		Nature of the operation		Image (re)construction
	Needs				Intentions
	Values				Wishes
	Beliefs				
	Skills				

Table III.
Concept, dimensions, and components of the service experience

is a personal and integral phenomenon (Neal and Gursoy, 2008) that incorporates perceptions and satisfaction levels into each aspect of the service, whether internal or external to the organisation or individuals.

The first dimension of analysis is called "predispositions" and incorporates customer provisions, tendencies, desires, preconceived images (based on previous experiences), needs, and values.

"Interactions" is a term used to describe the second dimension and clearly identifies the moment of service delivery: when the customer makes physical or virtual contact with the organisation or when the customer's interactions with the physical and technological environment and the company's human resources occur.

The last dimension refers to "reactions" in the sense of a chemical reaction, which produces new components, and not a physical reaction involving two opposing bodies. Experiences modify the customer, provoking emotions, decisions, wishes, actions, learnings, and perceptions that solidify or alter their images of the organisation. In a cyclic process, these reactions turn into predispositions which influence future relationships with the organisation. As a result, handling and managing the experiential spaces before, during, and after service delivery becomes a challenge for those service managers who wish to improve their competitive positioning.

The most actionable dimension for company leadership in terms of management and influence is the one of "interactions" in daily situations, where there is a greater contact between the customer and the organisation. However, marketing efforts can generate customer needs, modify customer values, minimise histories of low-quality service delivery, or reshape negative images, but at high costs. These dimensions are discussed in more detail later in the paper.

4.1 Predispositions

The service experience can be influenced by preconceived images or previous experiences (Ladhari, 2009; Allred and Money, 2010) but can equally build upon, consolidate, or modify such images (Finsterwalder and Tuzovic, 2010; Svari *et al.*, 2011). The image is, at once, the input and the result of the experience (Ladhari, 2009; Boshoff and Leong, 1998). Even if one has never heard of or had contact with the company, the existence of a disposition to contact it for possible service delivery means that the company has already built an image that predisposes potential customers to go through the experience. This motivation may have originated in the image built by appropriate organisational marketing efforts, customer needs and values, company location, lack of alternatives, or a series of other isolated or combined factors (Ryu *et al.*, 2008). In the case of hotels, for example, inaccurate or inconsistent information during the reservation process can explain the difference between the expectations or preconceived images and the actual experience that a customer goes through, or the built image, with severe consequences for the business (Briggs *et al.*, 2007).

The inputs of the service experience correspond to a set of customer predispositions, which is symbolised by several components. They are not self-contained and immutable; they are strongly linked to client subjectivity and are therefore susceptible to influences of mood, climate, individual relations with consumption, pre-judgements, emotional state, health condition, needs, values, religion, and other factors (Chang and Horng, 2010; Finsterwalder and Tuzovic, 2010).

The needs and values of the involved players, both customers and company employees, build part of the experience (Chang and Horng, 2010), because they are the elements that together potentialise the motivation, or lack thereof, to live through the experience in a

more or less intense way (Allred and Money, 2010). The socio-cultural and environmental context is deeply relevant to the service experience, considering that it affects the customers' responses as well as the real or perceived waiting time experienced during service delivery (Allred and Money, 2010; Ladhari, 2009; Patricio *et al.*, 2008). The context incorporates the singularity of the evaluated organisation, the historic moment, the recognition of the trademark, and regional aspects. Generally, it cannot be modified by the organisation, but the reach of its influence must be understood, and actions must be taken to eliminate or minimise its effects.

The plurality of representations and meanings that individuals attributed to the situations through which they have lived can cause the service experience to be extremely satisfactory in some circumstances but not in others (Ladhari, 2009; Svari *et al.*, 2011). However, customers come with predispositions that impact the service experience (Yeung and Leung, 2007; De Rojas and Camarero, 2008). Bold individuals, for example, will have a greater predisposition to try services that incorporate a high level of personal exposition, and this personality trait is not easily changed.

4.2 Interactions

Interactions are those activities and resources that are mobilised by the organisation in the rendering of the service and turn predispositions into reactions. These interaction spaces and instances are known as service encounters (Cronin Jr and Taylor, 1992; Allred and Money, 2010; Finsterwalder and Tuzovic, 2010), moments of truth (Zehrer, 2009; Svari *et al.*, 2011), or critical incidents (Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Voorhees *et al.*, 2009; Chang and Horng, 2010). These interactions are affected by the complexity of the service operations, the real and perceived duration of the service, the level and quality of the contact between customers and organisation staff, the employed technologies, the infrastructure, and the information system (Bassani *et al.*, 2008). Gopalan and Narayan (2010) have classified the components that mediate and influence the service experience as: extrinsic (including the government policies and infrastructure of cities) and intrinsic (under the domination of managers of the service organisations).

The service experience is mediated or moderated by people, technology, and infrastructure (Froehle and Roth, 2004; Patricio *et al.*, 2008; Ladhari, 2009) which could be the customers themselves, the company staff (Bettencourt and Gwinner, 1996), or other customers, mainly when they share in the service delivery actively or passively, such as in tours, bank lines, and hospitals (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Finsterwalder and Tuzovic, 2010).

Some companies require the customer to enter into the work environment to make the purchasing decision. Contact with the tangible elements of the environment builds the perception of the corporate image that will positively or negatively influence the experience through which the customer lives (Brunner-Sperdin *et al.*, 2012). As to the customer-employee interaction, Boshoff and Leong (1998) note that it can be improved if employees take responsibility for customer problems, solve them, and apologise for any possible drawbacks. A factor that mediates the service experience is the degree of involvement, knowledge, and skill that customers have with the employed technologies (Patricio *et al.*, 2008). In some types of service, such as in bank self-service systems, internet purchases, or LAN houses, these strongly influence the customer experience. Depending on the cultural level, age group, and level of functional literacy, the rendering of the service only becomes viable with the direct intervention of the company's personnel, to create a better experience for the customer.

4.3 Reactions
Chen and Chen (2010) define the service experience as the result of consumption or use of
a service, manifested by subjective sensations and reactions. The experience predisposes
the customer to more complex reactions (outputs) than the mere verification of the quality
of the service or the perception of value. The service experience is a process or a logical
sequential chain that converts resources into results, in the form of feelings, emotions,
learnings, and intentions. The emotions and learnings that result from consumption
can be explicit or silent, conscious or unconscious, focused on a given situation
(fear, rage, joy), or general (positive, neutral, or negative), and they can mark, mediate,
and moderate the client's decisions to consume, as well as guide current and future
consumption (Ladhari, 2009; Hutchinson *et al.*, 2009; Svari *et al.*, 2011).

A reaction, in the sense that it is used here, does not necessarily mean that there is
an action by the subject, but instead that there is a (re)definition of the set of input
predispositions, which gives them greater, smaller, or equal stature compared to
how they were before the experience and creates predispositions for future contact with
the organisation.

The service experience is also seen as a moment of learning for the customer and for
the organisation. At this instant, judgements are formed about the organisation, the
quality of the rendering of the service, and the perception of value (Patricio *et al.*, 2008;
Ladhari, 2009; Voorhees *et al.*, 2009; Chang and Horng, 2010). The behaviours and
emotions from the service experience result from the client's wishes and expectations,
or they are induced by his or her social group or applied from the outside by some other
agent; all of these subjective factors are widely observed in the literature (Ladhari, 2009;
Voorhees *et al.*, 2009; Chang and Horng, 2010; Svari *et al.*, 2011).

The customer's most obvious reactions are satisfaction, which is an important positive
outcome for the business, or frustration, which is exactly the opposite, but others of
greater or smaller magnitude are also observed. However, it would not be adequate to
maintain that every experience is either enchanting or frustrating, since such a pattern
has not been observed in the reference literature, where the use of gradual scales is
common for measuring the service experience (Mikulić and Prebežac, 2011). Obviously,
there can be explicit reactions in the form of retelling of a satisfactory experience or
rejection of an unsatisfactory one, but what one considers as relevant are the subjective
and inter-subjective aspects that, in some cases, predispose the client to action. Included
in this scope are cognitive, affective, behavioural, and symbolic factors as well as
those that will form the client's intentions after living through the experience (Högström
et al., 2010; Martin-Ruiz *et al.*, 2010; Gross and Pullman, 2012).

As far as implications for future works, it is recommended that empirical studies
be conducted with various service providers for the validation of this proposed concept.
The possibility emerges of creating a standard instrument for measuring the service
experience, incorporating its three dimensions (predispositions, interactions, and reactions)
and their components. The challenge is that the instrument should contain coherent items
supported by this theory, with appropriate metrics, so that it may be indiscriminately
applied to any type of service in order to empirically test this approach. Because it is
not possible to directly measure the service experience because of its subjectivity,
it is necessary to create attributes that express the dimensions and components whose
relation with what one wants to measure is supported by the theory.

Service companies need to differentiate the service experience and adapt it to individual
customers (Högström *et al.*, 2010), which implies a differentiated reading on business and
on knowing, measuring, and understanding the lived experience. The literature still shows

that cognitive and emotional appreciation must be integrated in order to obtain more information on consumer satisfaction and behaviour (Martin-Ruiz *et al.*, 2010). The SERVQUAL model (see Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988) is a generic and widely used instrument for the assessment of quality in services. However, Huang *et al.* (2012) question the fact that the instrument disregards affective factors and the endogenous and exogenous environments that contribute to understanding the experiential phenomenon. In light of this, instruments for measuring the service experience need to consider not only expectations and performance but also predispositions – which are more than expectations – and interactions and reactions – which are more than perceptions of performance.

5. Conclusions

The main contribution of this paper to the services area is to refine a concept not fully clarified in the literature that might guide other researchers on developing instruments in service operations management when conducting empirical work. Until now, numerous studies have been conducted based on theories which do not carry the experiential nature of some types of services, compromising the understanding of the aspects that drive services companies to improve performance.

In the past three years, service experience has begun to be treated as a distinct concept from service quality, although there are publications that specifically explore their interaction. Even with the great interest in service experience as identified by publications, an explicit concept that encompasses the amplitude and complexity of the theme has not been made evident in the qualified literature.

In the current bibliometric study, a portfolio of 55 articles was retrieved, where the most representative articles, references, journals, and keywords were identified. The analysis of the content of these articles oriented the construction of the service experience concept, explicitly based on its dimensions and components. The service experience is a phenomenon of systemic origin that individually processes itself and generates learning, emotions, and meanings that mediate customer relationships with the organisation.

From this, the service experience concept has taken on the metaphor of a process, divided into the interdependent and complementary dimensions of "predispositions", "interactions", and "reactions", which condition the perception of service delivery quality and current and future relationships with the organisation. These dimensions support objective components, such as service duration; subjective ones, such as customer feelings and emotions; and inter-subjective ones, which result from the relationship between the people who take part in the service delivery. The metaphor comparing the service experience to a process is adequate as a symbolic resource because the concept dealt with here is theoretical, rather subjective, and needs to be made explicit, because it is intended to be understood, communicated, and disseminated. Individuals deal with conventional metaphors (of process, for example) more easily understand the associated content.

The present study defends the notion that the service experience is conditioned not only by service delivery but also by a set of controllable factors as well as other factors which are out of the domain of the organisation, but subject to influence in some cases. The study still verifies the importance of dissociating the research on service experience from research on the service quality, considering that the usual models of quality evaluation disregard affective, cognitive, and behavioural aspects, such as cultural and personality traits, that make the experience singular to each client, at that instant, under those conditions that present themselves in environmental and

technological terms as well as in terms of interpersonal relationships. Customer experiences configure themselves into predispositions for future relationships with the organisation, and it is only for this reason that they deserve a differentiated treatment, which is one of the purposes in the sequence of this work. There is also a need for the construction of an instrument to measure the service experience, based on the proposed concept, and for empirical studies to validate or reject the dimensions of analysis that are addressed in this paper.

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