Towards the Crux of Customer Service Experiences: Taking a Multisensory Processing Perspective

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Today’s best performing companies design multisensory rich experiences and do not solely sell products or services (Gartner 2014; Maklan, Antonetti and Whitty 2017). The shift from service provider to experience facilitator can be observed cross-industrial. Next to companies such as Walt Disney, also other industries have realized that customers do not buy products or services but experiences instead. Customers that book with Airbnb are more interested in the complete experience of the place they are discovering, rather than merely booking of a hotel room (Brochado, Troilo and Shah 2017).

While customer experiences have traditionally been studied as an outcome variable, more recently researchers and practitioners have realized that they have to go beyond isolated paths to understand how customers integrate environmental stimuli through all their senses and across multiple touchpoints that holistically shape their service experiences (Homburg, Jozić and Kuehnl 2017; Lemon and Verhoef 2017). Capturing these multisensory stimuli is particularly impeded through the interrelationship of customers’ prior knowledge and experiences which are stored as mental shortcuts that help them assess new experiences (Van Kesteren et al. 2010).

The importance of customer experiences is nothing new to managers and researchers alike. Several disciplines such as operations, design, management, marketing and services have contributed significantly to investigate the dynamic and holistic concept of customer experience from a phenomenological, process and outcome perspective (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Helkulla 2011). The complexity of the concept is elevated in Homburg, Jozić and Kuehnl (2017, p. 384)’s recent definition: “customer experience is the evolvement of a person’s sensorial, affective, cognitive, relational, and behavioral responses to a firm or brand
by living through a journey of touchpoints along prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase situations and continually judging this journey against response thresholds of co-occurring experiences in a person’s related environment”. Central to this definition is the dynamic and context dependent nature. Especially with services customers need to rely heavily on all their senses to form their perception and appraisal (Von Wallpach and Kreuzer 2013). Zomerdijk and Voss (2010) find that customer service experience is shaped by sensing and acquiring knowledge through the interaction with contextual cues. In fact, an extensive body of servicescape literature demonstrates that the physical surrounding of a service offering is more important in shaping the customer experience than the actual service offering (Bitner 1992; Deroy et al. 2016; Lin and Worthley 2012).

The example of John, an Airbnb host who offers a city fitness tour through London on Airbnb’s experience platform illustrates the above. The actual service he provides is a guided fitness tour; however, the participants’ experiences are shaped by their sensory perception of the environment. Thus, the active movement in performing the exercises, the viewing of street art and London’s woodland forest, the smell of the environment, the taste of the drinks and local food at the end of the tour and the sound of Josh’s voice giving instructions and of the environment in which participant’s perform their activities. The above is in the literature referred to as embodied cognition, which refers to the motor system that is activated by the senses and influences people’s cognition (Von Wallpatch and Kreuzer 2013). Thus, in the Airbnb example, participants are exposed to environmental cues that holistically shape their cognitive, emotional and psychological perceptions. Taken together these perceptions guide customer behavior.

Although a substantial body of research recognizes senses as an integral part of the customer experience definition (De Keyser et al. 2016; Homburg, Jozić and Kuehnl 2017; Lemon and Verhoef 2016), to date an in-depth understanding of what role customer senses actually play is limited service research. The purpose of this paper is to open this black box by conceptualizing multisensory processing as the crux in understanding customer service experiences. Building on servicescape literature, this article advances service research and practice by unraveling the role of multisensory stimuli processing as the key mechanism forming customers’ mental models that aid them in understanding their experiences.

A literature review on servicescape and customer experience literature is undertaken, together with a cross-disciplinary review of psychology and neuroscience research on multisensory integration. Furthermore, an illustrative case provides empirical support for the conceptual framework of multisensory processing. The authors’ use Airbnb’s recently
established experience platform as a case example. Analyzing Airbnb’s experience offerings and corresponding customer reviews for three capitals in Europe enables providing empirical support for the conceptual framework.

Sensory stimuli, often in the literature referred to as cues, are stored in schemas that help customers understand the environment (Dedeoglu et al. 2018; Lin and Worthley 2012). In the Airbnb example participants of the fitness sightseeing tour evaluate their experiences against self-created schemas that help them understand the new experience in light of their existing knowledge. Schemas have extensively been researched in psychology and neuroscience (Van Kesteren et al. 2012) and are particularly important for shaping new customer experiences. A schema may be defined as a heuristic which facilitates the retrieval of complex information of the environment (Van Kesteren et al. 2012). They result from a multitude of cues that are utilized self-created mental concepts and which are used to recognize, organize and understand the environment. In addition, they serve as a reference point for future evaluations and thus enable consolidating and encoding memories. Schemas are affected by all sensory information that is received. They are altered by assimilation or accommodation. The first referring to incorporating environmental elements into an existing mental model without challenging existing relationships and the latter referring to a modification of an existing mental model. Furthermore, research has shown that the existence of prior knowledge (in form of mental models) to which new information can be related improves the memory for that information.

Van Kesteren et al. (2010) have shown that multisensory stimuli (thus stimuli triggering multiple senses) create richer schemas, which is particularly interesting for customer service experience (CSE) research and service managers and found that multisensory ‘loaded’ schemas enable creating richer memories. Thus, the customer can share more detailed reviews of their experiences for example on Airbnb’s website. In addition, understanding these models enables designing extrinsic cues that facilitate richer service experiences (Zomerdijk and Voss 2010).

Furthermore, Van Kasteren et al. (2010) show how multisensory stimuli that fit with prior knowledge are known as schema-congruent (i.e. in line with the existing mental model) and multisensory information that is congruent with prior experiences is easier recalled by individuals: “semantic congruency of multisensory stimuli acts as a schema [mental model] and leads to enhanced memory performance along with enhanced activity […] at retrieval” (p. 15889).
Even though multisensory experience is pervasive in everyday life, the relationship between multisensory integration and perception awareness remains unclear. Despite the proposed link between information integration and mental model creation, the role of multisensory stimuli on preserving memory of the service experiences remains unclear.

In this article the authors use cue utilization theory and embodied cognition theory to explain how multisensory stimuli shape customer service experiences by the illustrative case example of Airbnb’s experience platform. Cue utilization theory maintains that customers process various cues which can be both internal and external to evaluate a particular service. In the product context Cox (1967) differentiates two dimensions that customers draw on to assign information value to a particular cue: the predictive value (PV) and the confidence value (CV). The first refers to an informational cue that is associated with the presence or absence of a desired product attribute; whereas the latter refers the level of confidence the customer has in his or her ability to judge a particular cue (Szybillo and Jacoby, 1972). Furthermore Szybillo and Jacoby (1972) show how customers selectively choose some stimuli over others to form their mental models.

Embodied cognition is defined by Von Wallpach and Kreuzer (2013, p. 1325) as “knowledge that results from multi-sensory brand [product or service] experiences, that is, subjective responses to brand-related stimuli consumers experience via multiple senses and introspective states consists of multi-sensory images reflecting consumer’s experiences”. In other words, embodied cognition refers to a non-conscious processing and storage of knowledge in form of mental models that allow customers to introspectively think, reflect and stimulate their experiences (Von Wallpach and Kreuzer 2013; Schwarz 2006).

Providing cross-disciplinary insights from psychology and neuroscience, the paper extends servicescape literature in two important ways. First, drawing on embodied cognition and cue utilization theory (Fejes and Wilson 2013; Von Wallpach and Kreuzer 2013), the authors conceptualize multisensory stimuli as the antecedent of mental models that enable customers to shape and understand their service experiences. Second, the paper reveals that service experiences which are perceived as multisensory rich enhance customers’ memory recall with regards to information details and enriches customer reviews.

The case of Airbnb’s experience platform guides service providers towards effective customer experience management by identifying, understanding, and managing multisensory stimuli to create meaningful customer service experiences. In particular, it can be shown that higher rankings of customer reviews are associated with multisensory richer experience descriptions provided by the hosts. Thus, the findings point managers towards a more holistic
approach that enables designing meaningful and multisensory rich service experiences, which leads to richer and more positive customer reviews and long-term memory storage.

**Keywords:** servicescape, customer experience, multisensory, stimuli, schema, memory
References:


