Introduction

Service from a business perspective has been explored extensively (Bowen, 2016). Firms often intentionally integrate service as a vital aspect of what they offer to their customers (Parasuraman, Zeithami, & Berry, 1985). For example, many automobile dealerships offer both sales and service. Full-service restaurants provide wait servers whose function is to take the meal order, customize it as requested, and later deliver the food when it has been prepared. Clothing stores often have employees conveniently placed on the showroom floor to answer questions and provide fashion help in making selections. All such activity is centered on the idea of providing customers with help in the acquisition and usage of their product.

However, service from a user perspective has not been explored in the same depth. There is a common understanding that humans sometimes need assistance in getting something done. This assistance usually includes the desire for another person to provide information, expertise, and to literally help bring the task to a successful completion. In short, service is needed when the user cannot complete the desired task without assistance from another person.

Overview of Service-Related literature

Many hospitality enterprises, including cruise lines, theme parks, lodging properties, dining venues and airlines, anchor their business models in service delivery and guest satisfaction. Extensive research has been conducted from the firm's perspective. Yet literature with respect to service from the user perspective is scant.

Service Experience

Scholars have completed many studies involving service and customer interactions. Gilmore and Pine (2002) researched the efficacy of differentiating hospitality operations via types of service experiences co-created to enhance customer satisfaction through both active and

immersive activities. Their research focused on different types of service dimensions surrounding: (1) entertainment (2) escapist (3) aesthetic and (4) educational service realms. According to Maier and Edwards (2020), service system design and customer experience blueprint mapping can be useful in improving focus on interactions between customers and service personnel. Moreover, they contended service system design blueprinting can be utilized as a roadmap towards technology adaption and automation components of the customer experience. While and Hao and Chon (2022) studied the impact of contactless service as an innovative service design meant to generate emotional and cognitive brand attachment.

Service Quality

Service quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations. In early foundational studies and lineage models of service quality a broad range of concepts and constructs were examined. For instance, service quality can be considered either tangible (a product) or intangible (a service experience). According to Gronoos (1978), customer perceptions of service quality can fall into both tangible and intangible categories. Unlike purchasing a tangible product, service quality is often judged by the production process and delivery procedure. Therefore, due to the complex nature of service intangibility; firms found it more difficult to understand how consumers perceive services and service quality. Moreover, McConnell (1968) suggested that price and service quality were closely related to the customer perception of quality and expected service performance. According to Lewis and Bloom (1983), delivering quality service meant conforming to customer expectations on a consistent basis. While Smith and Houston (1982) asserted that customer satisfaction was closely linked to confirmation or disconfirmation of their needs and expectations. They based their research on the disconfirmation paradigm, which maintained that satisfaction is related to the size and direction

of the disconfirmation experience where disconfirmation is related to the customers initial expectations (Churchill & Suprenaut, 1982).

Enz and Siguaw (2000) examined best practices in service quality and reported quality of service enhancements occurred given the presence of service champions among the workforce. Their findings outlined four key categories necessary to ensure quality service: (1) creating a service culture, (2) building an empowered service-delivery system, (3) facilitating a customer listening orientation, and (4) developing responsive service guarantees. Their findings emphasized the importance of employee empowerment in creating a service excellence culture.

Testa and Sipe (2006) expanded on the TQM literature with their research into the positive impact associated with managers "digging deeper" into root causes of customer service problems with the time-tested constructs of TQM-repeatedly asking Why questions? until the cause is revealed. Most importantly, they believe involving employees in solving service-related problem accelerates potential procedural adoption along with flow-chart mapping service design.

As customer satisfaction expectations evolved in the marketplace so too has the research. More recently, the key focus areas of service quality research began to evaluate organizations shifting from profit centric measures to maximizing profits through increased customer satisfaction; compelling organizations not only look at the service processes but also on the way service is delivered. The key ingredients to service quality improvements identified included: (1) clear market and customer focus, (2) motivated staff, (3) clear understanding of concepts of service quality, (4) effective measurement and feedback system, (5) effective implementation system, and (6) efficient customer care system (Nitin and Deshmukh 2005).

Lusch and Vargo (2014) delved into the theory of service dominant logic. The main tenets of which are: (1) knowledge and skills through deeds, (2) service processes, and (3)

performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself. Most importantly, the advancement of service dominant logic attempted to establish an increasingly more palatable acceptance amongst scholars and practitioners that service value and quality is created by customers for customers (Bowen, 2016). Further, the customer service outcomes of research interest broadened in scope in the marketing literature from perceptions of service quality and customer satisfaction to an overall, holistic, extended customer experience (Klaus, 2015; Verhoef et al., 2009).

Service and Technology

As technological enhancements and customer insights evolved, organizations began to explore ways to gain competitive advantages by gathering information on market demands and customer preferences. With respect to service and technology, Dabholkar and Bagozzi (2002) analyzed the perceived waiting time and customer anxiety associated with self-service. They investigated the various traits associated with customer self-efficacy and the need to interact with an employee rather than self-serve and found ease of use, fun and performance were the key attributes associated with technology adoption. Technology adoption has been on the forefront of service and guest satisfaction improvements for quite some time. Given the proliferation of digital customer interfaces, hospitality enterprises are investigating the efficacy of virtual service agents to deliver customer experiences (Hagberg, Sundstrom, & Egels-Z, 2016). Additionally, Chung et. al (2020) analyzed whether luxury fashion retail brands can deliver personalized service typically embedded in face-to-face interactions through emergent digital chatbot tools. Their research into chatbots and service interactions revealed Chatbots can indeed deliver engaging customer service encounters given the right situations and type of customer segment.

Customer Chatbot communication experiences with conversational bots compared with instant messaging users' communication experience with human conversational agents revealed that media richness and social presence positively influenced trust and reuse intention through task attraction and social attraction. Instant messenger users reported significantly higher scores in terms of communication experience, perceived attractiveness of the conversational agent, and trust than chatbot users (Lei, S.I., Shen, H. & Ye, 2021).

As hospitality research continued to evolve, Kim and Kizildag (2011) evaluated the growing trend of technology application in the hospitality educational system which may eventually lead to more technology adoption among customer and service forward entities. More recent service-related research from Shin and Jeong (2022) explored the impact technologies have on guests' perceived value perceptions with respect to task–technology fit, satisfaction, and brand loyalty.

Service design system components surrounding robotic adoption have received increased attention from both practitioners and academics. Tuomi_et.al, (2021) investigated the impact of humanoid service robots embedded in hospitality service encounters. Their research centered on both receptionist ad order taking automation with results indicating the most routine, unpleasant tasks such as taking repeat orders or dealing with complaints may be delegated to service robots or human-robot teams. With respect to serve automation and robotics in the restaurant sector, Byrd et.al. (2021) analyzed off-premises service modes, especially food delivery robots. He measured the potential differences associated with customer service quality perceptions and actual customer perceptions when engaging with robots. His findings indicated customers had lower expectations for food safety and food quality from robot- and human-delivered food as

well as lower service-related performance from robot-delivery for service efficiency and ease of use (than human-delivery and carry-out) and monetary value (than carry-out).

Emerging technology research has focused on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and service delivery interfaces. Researchers and practitioners alike have increasingly evaluated AI technology-based service enhancements as potential opportunities to solve labor shortages and increase productivity. In 2021, Li, Yin, Qiu, and Bai developed an integrated model to identify key elements that influence AI technology-based service encounters. Their findings set forth four key modes of potential AI-based service encounters: (1) AI-supplemented, (2) AI-generated, (3) AI-mediated, and (4) AI-facilitated encounters.

Service and Customer Relationship Management

Parvatiyar and Sheth (2001) articulated CRM as an over-arching strategy which encompasses several key customer interactions: (1) acquiring, (2) retaining, and (3) partnering with selective customers to create superior value for the organization. Their findings emphasized the importance of integrating marketing, sales, customer service, and the supply-chain capabilities to achieve improved operating efficiencies and customer value. With respect to customer value, Brodie, Whittome, and Brush (2009) found a direct influence of brand perception on customers' overall perceptions of value. They contended brand and company image along with employee trust influence customer perception of service quality.

Linking customer value and service quality has been explored in research surrounding the social exchange between customer and employee. That exchange is said to create a mutual responsibility. In their findings, Sierra and McQuitty (2005) indicated the importance of positive emotions driving the employee-customer exchange. They also indicated shared responsibility between employee and customer experience led to increased customer loyalty.

"Self-Service" is Not Service

Many firms have incorporated 'self-service' in the design of their product as assistance for the customer. It's often presented as an improvement in efficiency. However, this is actually a transfer of the labor and its associated cost from the firm to the customer. As an example, for decades throughout the early-to-mid 20th century, gasoline stations had employees who would fill the automobile tank with fuel, check the engine oil level, wash the car windows, and add air to tires. At busy times, customers would have to wait in their cars until an employee could serve them. To address this delay (and to avoid having to add more labor cost by providing additional employees), gas stations allowed customers to pump their own gas, eliminating the wait for an employee to do it. The gas pumps did not need to be physically altered although payment devices were added. Customers were simply given easy instructions so that they could do it themselves. The customer gained speed in terms of getting the fuel into their tank but in exchange, they lost the oil check, window washing, and tire air services. Gas stations still earned the income from the sale of fuel but also saved the labor cost of providing the additional services. It was presented as an improvement for the customer, but the greater benefit was to the gas station enterprise. The speed of the transaction enjoyed by the customer also meant potentially more sales for the firm as the pumps more quickly became available for the next car. The labor cost was reduced considerably as was the employee skill set. The gas station employee essentially became a cashier who only processed payments. The customer did everything else.

Grocery stores have added optional 'self-service' check-out stations, enabling the customer to scan the bar codes of purchased products and then use the same machines to pay either with cash or by credit card. One store attendant is typically available to monitor a set of check-out stations, providing technical support for machine malfunctions (and supervising the

sale of controlled products such as liquor and cigarettes). Like the gas station situation, retail firms tout this self-service check-out as quicker than waiting in line for a store employee to process their selections. But it also means that the customer does the work of the store cashier, scanning the products and processing the payment. The store saves money by having one employee supporting 4, 6, or even 10 check-out stations.

Airlines have enabled customers to perform many of the functions that previously only employees could do. Websites and smart phone applications can provide flight availability and costs. Customers can make reservations and pay for tickets independently by using the firm's website or smart phone application (app). This has greatly reduced the number of employees needed by the airlines at physical ticket offices and at their telephone reservation centers. Physical ticket offices in cities and towns have all but completely disappeared. Telephone wait times to speak to a reservation agent have greatly increased. As a result, customers are encouraged by the airlines to utilize the firm's websites to perform these tasks themselves.

But this transfer of labor does not end with the booking and ticketing transaction. Customers can use the firm's website or phone app to select seats, upgrade to different classes of service on the airplane (economy, business class, first class, etc.), and check-in for the flight near the time of departure. For certain very long flights, customers can pre-order food in advance via the same company website. Those with physical disabilities can also pre-order wheelchair assistance or other such support services.

The boarding pass can be printed at home or stored electronically on a smart phone. This is a transfer of the printing cost (printer, paper, and ink) to the customer because these functions are encouraged to be done in advance at home. Or, if the boarding pass is stored on a smart

phone, the customer had paid to provide the smart phone and cellular service, which again relives the airline of the cost of providing a physical boarding pass.

When the customer arrives at the airport, it used to be that the airline employees handled all aspects of the check-in and aircraft boarding process. That has all changed. Customers now perform most of the same functions. Customers are provided self-service kiosks where they can check-in for the flight and print boarding passes (if they haven't done that in advance from home). Additionally, the customer can often use the kiosk to check luggage as well. Payment for the luggage fee can be processed at the kiosk using a credit card. The machine will print the tag that the customer is to then attach to the handle of the luggage. The airline has a roving employee that monitors a set of kiosks and provides technical support as needed. While the customer still must wait in a line to deliver the tagged luggage to an airline employee (who confirms it was tagged correctly and meets the size and weight limitations), the airline has reduced the number of employees needed to perform the same functions.

These are three easily recognized industry examples (gas stations, grocery stores, and airlines) where a labor component of a firm's product has been transferred to the customer. More examples can be found in other industries (e.g., McDonald's self-ordering kiosks inside their restaurants, smart phone apps for ordering take-out meals for pick-up or home delivery, the Home Depot or Walmart smart phone app that provides product information and where to find it in the store, etc.). For many individual consumers, most of these options are warmly welcomed. The trade-off between efficiency and speed is often preferred over long waiting times for an employee to perform the function. However, presenting it to the customer as 'self-service' is only self-serving for the firm. It is actually customer automated assistance. For the customer, it is an increase in labor and occasionally, cost (e.g., printing boarding passes using home

equipment). That is not service. It is not the firm providing human assistance. Even the phrase ‘self-service’ denotes the solo activity and the exclusion of employee. It is the firm transferring a portion of the labor component of their product to the consumer.

Transforming Customer Automated Assistance into Customer Service

The customer automated assistance described in the preceding section does, for most customers, improve efficiency by automation and technology. Time is saved when the customer can perform the function at the precise moment when desired (e.g., pump the gas or check-out at the grocery store). However, there are some customers who cannot perform the labor of the transferred task. Not everyone has the personal equipment, such as a computer or smart phone with apps, to process airline transactions or to pre-order food for take-out or delivery. Not everyone wants to bother to learn how to do these tasks themselves. Others have physical impairments that limit the ability to manipulate the gas pump or stand at the check-out scanners where it is necessary to lift all products purchased and scan them with the machine. So, while firm-transferred labor to the customer does usually result in improved efficiency for both the customer and the firm, it isn’t a panacea for all consumers. These other customers still require the assistance of a human being.

Another consequence of the transferred labor is a reduction in human interaction with the firm’s employees. For example, with the advent of the banking automated teller machine (ATM), most customers can conduct basic banking transactions through the machine. Cash can be withdrawn and often deposits can be made. Telephone calls to the bank’s automated phone system could be used to check balances and implement transfers of funds between accounts. With the advent of smart phone apps, customers can perform deposits, make transfers, check

balances, etc., whenever they have an Internet connection, 24-hours a day. These activities can be completed without ever encountering a bank employee. The bank, then, often becomes a dispassionate, faceless entity.

The U.S. Post Office now offers 'self-service' mailing stations in their lobbies. Customers can weight a letter or package, enter shipping information into the machine, pay for postage with a credit card, attach the postage to the letter of package, and insert the package or letter into the nearby drop slot. Free self-sealing boxes are provided with their flat-rate and express delivery package services. Without the human connection in either of these examples, customers often feel that they are just an account number of little importance to the bank or continue to feel they are even less than that for the Post Office.

The integration of the consumer into the order creation process (e.g., McDonald's ordering kiosk or airline websites) and the order delivery process (e.g., pumping gasoline or operating the automated postage machine at the post office) has unquestionably created efficiencies for both consumer and firm. However, satisfied the consumer may feel in completing the transaction in an efficient manner, there is little emotion involved (Heffernan and LaValle, 2007). Allegiance to the firm is marginally changed. Loyalty exists if the firm continues to perform efficiently and provide customer value (Brodie, Whittome, & Brush, 2007). If there is a breakdown in the performance (the machine stops working) and the consumer turns to the firm for further assistance, it is often lacking. Without having built prior relationships and brand equity with firm employees they can trust, the consumer can feel lost and faceless. They feel as if their issue is of little interest or loyalty to the firm (Brodie, Whittome, & Brush, (2009). That is evidenced by the often-long wait times when calling a customer service phone number or wandering the sales floor, searching for an employee.

What can change this dynamic is the emotional connection between the customer and the firm's employee who is providing the assistance. Both are humans who have the inherent range of emotions shared by virtually all members of the species. The interaction between the customer and the employee, albeit brief, can be deeply infused with emotional content. Consumers usually want to feel that the firm cares about them as a customer, values their business, and is interested in making them satisfied (Verhoef, et al.,2009). In addition, the employee who seeks these service-providing roles also often wants to experience the feeling of satisfaction (a job well done) when they satisfy a customer. This infusion of human emotion in the service encounter by both customer and employee is what transforms the automated customer assistance into true service. It is the difference between a house and a home. The house has all the basic components necessary for living: a roof overhead to keep one dry and warm, beds for sleeping, couches and chairs for sitting, etc. By itself, it is bland and sterile. But it is the living use of the house by people that changes that sterile house into a place where one lives permanently, where one keeps family and individual treasures, where photos and decorations make it personal, and where other loved ones share the space. Service, then, requires the human connection between customer and employee. Without it, it is not service. It is merely automated assistance.

Aspects of the Service Transaction

For the user, there are six general expectations in the actual service transaction. Note that the service encounter is not limited to a business situation. It can occur in any aspect of life including social, religious, government, etc. It is a situation where a user desires to complete a task, but it cannot be done without human assistance. The six general expectations are human

interaction, tone of voice, a welcoming demeanor, eye contact, meaningful language, and the service protocol.

First, the service will be provided from another human, not a machine. Users want to be able to describe their need and communicate with the helper, fine-tuning the assistance request as needed for the situation. Service employees can bring expertise and past experiences to aid in their understanding of the customer need and to identify methods of creating a solution. The customer often needs to describe their need, expressing a range of emotions and details that the employee needs to process through. Machines usually cannot react and adjust to this volume of information and the associated verbal nuances. Humans can.

Second, the employee (or server, the individual providing the service) is expected to greet the user with a pleasant tone of voice. The user needs to feel comfortable in seeking the assistance and the tone of the server's voice will help to create that sense of comfort (Enz and Siguaw, 2000). A gruff greeting usually does not bode well in the mind of the customer. Rather, a voice filled with warmth and openness sets the stage for a more positive encounter (Churchill and Suprenaut, 1982). This becomes an invitation for the customer to relax, to take the time necessary to describe their problem, and to do so without fear of derision.

Third, simultaneously with the 2nd phase, the server is expected to have a welcoming demeanor. That is, the server is expected to demonstrate a willingness to provide service. A facial expression with a smile accompanying a quick recognition of the customer immediately begins this welcoming process. The consumer believes the employee is there to help. When the employee acts as if the customer contact is an interruption of something else, or even an annoyance, the consumer can detect this immediately. Instead, the employee should recognize

that serving customers is a key aspect of their role and should allow this priority to show in how rapidly and warmly they welcome the contact by the customer.

Fourth, the server is expected to make eye contact with the user. While tone of voice and immediacy of response are important, the eye contact helps to create a meaningful human-to-human connection between the user and the server. This helps to personalize the encounter as one recognized as between two human beings and not just a mechanical or sterile transaction (one without feelings). Eye contact is essential for humans to feel recognized by another and is categorized in the service etiquette realm of functional service quality (Gronroos, 1978). As such, it is essential in the creation of a memorable service experience.

Fifth, the server is expected to communicate using language that is easy to understand, grammatically correct, and free from slang or industry jargon. In other words, the user expects the server to speak in a manner that is clear and easily understood. To confirm clarity in communication, the server should speak calmly and patiently, using common words to indicate an understanding of the need expressed by the consumer. This action of repeating the expressed need helps the customer to know that the server has understood what is needed. As importantly, it confirms to the customer that the server has been focused on listening to them. This sense of the server being focused aids in building the consumer's sense of priority by that employee. It strengthens the positive emotional experience. In contrast, if the server does not repeat back the expressed need and does not do so in easily understood words, the consumer could be left with either a feeling of not being very important to the server or confused about the behavior of the server. That sense of uncertainty can be avoided if the server will demonstrate their focus on the customer.

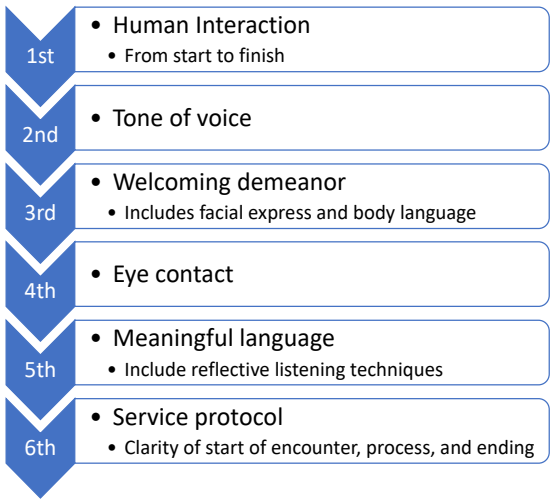
Finally, the user expects to clearly know when the service begins, what routine or process will be performed (the service protocol), and to understand when the service encounter has ended. Usually, the service encounter begins when the customer contacts the service employee. The employee should respond as described in the previous steps. In doing so, the customer now understands that the service encounter has begun. Without the earlier steps, the customer may feel that the employee is not paying attention or has elected to not respond to the request for assistance. The customer may feel that they have approach the wrong individual to ask for help. Having the employee perform the initial steps (1 through 5 above) helps confirm for the customer that the service encounter has started.

The next phase is the experience of the server responding and providing the solution needed by the customer. As each organization is different, customers are not always sure about what to expect from the employee after the request for assistance has been made. The employee can make this clear in what is said and done next. This activity of informing the customer of how the solution will be found is the service procedure. Typically, the employee, after restating the expressed need so that clarity is achieved (stage 5), explains what can be done or provided to satisfy the customer need. Options, instructions, information, or directions can then be offered to the customer, depending on the situation.

The final aspect of the service encounter is to know when it has ended. The employee should confirm that the consumer's need has been met through the solution offered. If the consumer is now satisfied, the employee can end the encounter by positively acknowledging that level of satisfaction. The employee can then turn his or her attention to another issue. Of course, if the consumer indicates he or she is not satisfied with the solution offered, the employee can continue working with the consumer until such satisfaction is achieved.

These combined aspects form what can be described as the experience-anticipation-expectation concept (Gilmore and Pine, 2002). Users have asked for assistance to complete an experience that they are having. They are anticipating that help will be given by an employee. Their expectation is that the service given will result in the successful completion of the experience. Throughout the service encounter, the consumer assumes that his or her emotions will be acknowledged. Further, the consumer assumes that efforts will be made to find a solution to the issue and achieve satisfaction. These stages of the service encounter are expressed in Figure 1 (below).

Figure 1. Stages of the Service Transaction



Conclusion

In summary, the components of a theory of service are found in a multitude of service transactions across a wide spectrum of industry settings. This theory of service article contemplates the service encounter through the lens of the user experience. Many firms have

adopted ‘self-service concepts or technologies’ in the design of their product as assistance for the customer. It’s often marketed as an improvement in efficiency. However, this is actually a transfer of the labor and the associated costs from the service provider to the customer. Given the emergence of self-service and virtual reality technologies, transforming customer automated assistance into viable customer service delivery with an emotional connection remains elusive.

The components of service theory are offered here as a perspective to help researchers and industry practitioners alike better understand differing behaviors of their customers, while also considering the implications technology and innovation present to various stakeholder groups. With respect to further labor transference from service provider to end user a few questions come to mind; What can change this dynamic is the emotional connection between the customer and the service providers front-line staff who are providing the assistance? How can the human interface and emotional connection remain viable?

The theory of service presented an understanding of the nature of service and the components associated with a typical service transaction. Human interaction remains at the core of service transactions. For the end user it is clear they desire to complete a task, but it cannot be done without human assistance and the six general expectations of human interaction. Whether that is done exclusively with a human interface or supplemented with automation and technological enhancements the service transaction still relies on human interactions. Therefore, as future service research continues to evolve, what role should automation play in the delivery of service? Should it be weighted more heavily in back-of-house production elements of the service design or fully integrated and interfaced into the entire customer journey? How does automation and the transfer of labor from service provider to customer impact the perception of quality and value?

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