

Introduction

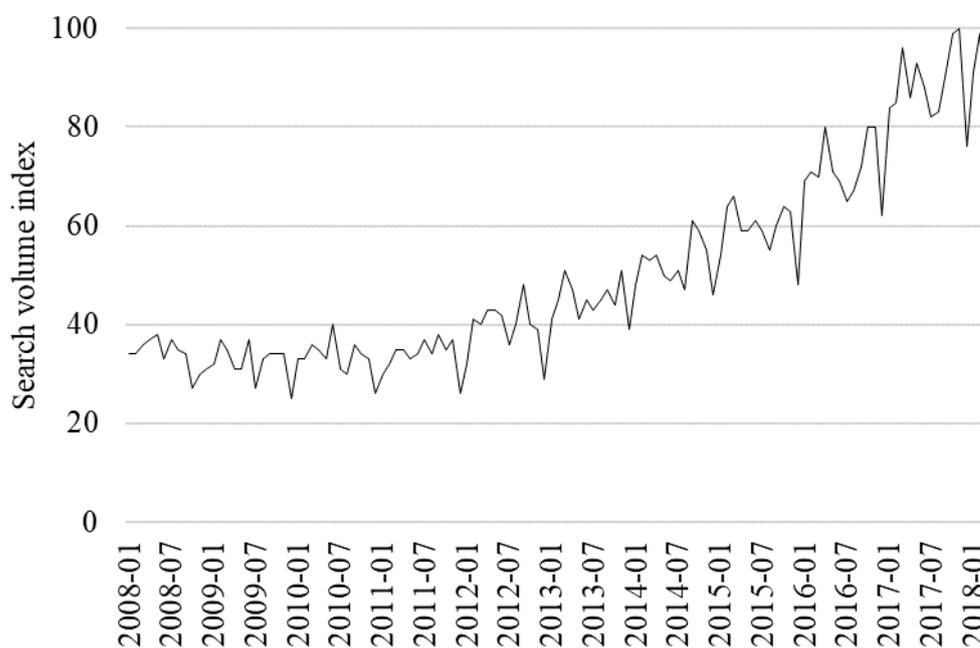
“We see our customers as invited guests to a party, and we are the hosts. It's our job every day to make every important aspect of the customer experience a little bit better.”

Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon

The phenomenon of customer experience (CE) is widely discussed among practitioners and scholars alike. A survey conducted by Oracle in 2012 among 1,342 senior executives from various industries revealed that 93% of respondents consider improving the CE as one of their firm's top three priorities within the following two years (Oracle 2013). In line with this, a more recent survey among 200 executives reported that by 2016, 89% of companies expect their competitive advantage to be attributable to CE (Gartner 2014). Taking Google searches as a proxy for popularity among the general public, Figure 1 shows that the interest in CE has tripled over the last ten years. CE has not only moved to the center of attention of practitioners but has also developed into a popular topic for scientific research fueled by the Marketing Science Institute listing “understanding customers and their customer experience“ (MSI 2014, p. 4) as one of their research priorities since 2010 (MSI 2010). While much marketing research in the past has focused on creating value for firms, the rise of CE research has moved the emphasis to creating value for the individual customer (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). This centrality of the customer is also resembled in CE's definition as “a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey“ (Lemon and Verhoef 2016,

p. 71). A purchase journey (or customer journey) comprises all interactions (so-called touchpoints or encounters) a consumer has with a firm when purchasing and using a product or service. A customer’s journey typically starts with information search and decision making, and continues with actual usage, experience, and resulting evaluations and loyalty behaviors.

Figure 1 Google search volume for “customer experience“ keyword 2008 – 2018



Thus, CE highlights the individual and contextual nature of consumer responses throughout the different phases of the customer journey. The CE perspective emphasizes that consumer responses are not only influenced by a cognitive evaluation of a firm’s offerings. A customer’s experience might likewise be affected by:

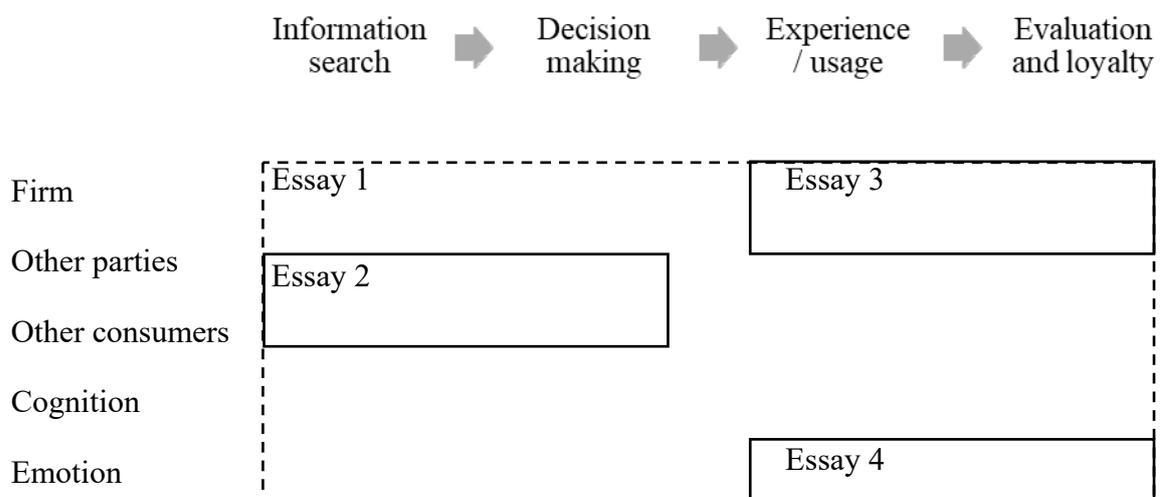
- prior interactions or experiences over time with a firm (e.g., Verhoef et al. 2004, Harmeling et al. 2015, essay 1),
- other consumers (e.g., Hui and Bateson 1991, Brocato et al. 2012, essay 2),

- other firms involved in the service delivery or value creation process (e.g., Patrício et al. 2011, Tax et al. 2013, essay 3),
- emotions experienced during interactions (e.g., Westbrook and Oliver 1991, Richins 1997, essay 4).

While the individual nature of consumer responses and the importance of emotions has been recognized from the early 80s (e.g., Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), more recent technological developments have substantially altered the ways consumers interact with firms. Consumers can now interact with firms through a myriad of offline, online, and mobile channels and the rise of social media has made consumption more public. Thus, today’s customer experiences are very complex and partly influenced by factors that are beyond the control of the focal firm. Thus, it is important to assess the impact of the various drivers of CE across the different phases of the customer journey.

The present dissertation features four essays using various methodologies and focusing on different phases of the customer journey that aim to contribute to building knowledge on what drives today’s customer experiences (see Figure 2 and Table 1).

Figure 2 Overview of focal characteristics and customer journey phases of essays



Essay 1 provides an overview and synthesis of three decades of customer experience research. Thus, essay 1 takes an encompassing approach and focuses on all phases of the customer journey. By means of an integrative literature review, we identify different perspectives toward CE (i.e., consumer and organizational perspective) and discuss the drivers of CE that have received scholarly attention in the past. Based on this synthesis, we develop an agenda for further research that serves as a basis for the following essays.

Essay 2 focuses on the information search and decision making phase of the customer journey. Enabled by the Internet, consumers can easily access different sources of information before making a purchase decision. Essay 2 analyzes how online ratings stemming from other consumers or experts influence decision making for credence services. Specifically, we analyze the case when both sources of advice are presented simultaneously (and are conflicting). This approach is novel and relevant as consumers are often exposed to a large amount of information and increasingly face the challenge of deciding which piece of advice to follow and which to reject. Based on experimental studies and the analysis of a large clickstream dataset from an actual healthcare rating platform, essay 2 assesses how the advice of other consumers and parties (here: experts) influences consumer decision making.

Essay 3 focuses on the actual experience and usage phase and the subsequent evaluation hereof. While consumer evaluations are still largely determined by a firm's offering, other firms involved in the service delivery might alter customer experiences. Essay 3 analyzes how branded (i.e., clearly visible and communicated) outsourcing of a firm-customer interaction (i.e., touchpoint or encounter) alters consumer evaluations of the focal firm as compared to an interaction being delivered by the focal firm itself. Based on experimental studies and the analysis of a large dataset from the field resulting from a

natural experiment, essay 3 assesses how and when a third party involvement influences customers' experiences with a focal firm.

Finally, essay 4 also focuses on the actual experience and usage phase and the subsequent evaluation hereof. The CE perspective emphasizes that next to cognition, a consumer's emotions play a large role in determining their CE and resulting firm evaluations. Essay 4 analyzes which discrete emotions experienced during an interaction have the greatest impact on firm-relevant outcomes such as evaluation, purchase behavior, and sharing. Based on a meta-analysis, we do not only provide insights on the importance of different discrete emotions but also on the situational and consumer factors that might alter this importance.

Table 1 Overview of research question, methodology, and focal customer journey phases per essay

	Title	Co-authors	Research question	Methodology	Phase customer journey
1	The multilevel nature of customer experience research: An integrative review and research agenda	Mirella Kleijnen, Robert Morgan, Marije Teerling	What is the status quo of customer experience literature?	Systematic literature review	All
2	The influence of consumer and expert ratings on the decision making for complex credence services	Mirella Kleijnen, Peeter Verlegh, Marije Teerling	How do simultaneously provided expert and consumer ratings affect decision making?	Experimental studies and analysis of field data (clickstream data)	Information search and decision making

3	Outsourcing the pain, keeping the pleasure: Effects of outsourced touchpoints in the customer journey	Mirella Kleijnen, Peeter Verlegh	How does branded (i.e., clearly visible) outsourcing of a touchpoint affect consumer evaluations of the focal firm?	Experimental studies and analysis of field data (natural experiment)	Experience / usage and evaluation
4	Beyond valence: A meta-analysis of discrete emotions in firm-customer encounters	Mirella Kleijnen, Peeter Verlegh, Alfred Zerres	How do discrete emotions experienced during a firm-customer encounter impact consumer evaluations and behaviors?	Meta-analysis	Experience / usage and evaluation

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