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Author(s): Kemppainen, Tiina; Frank, Lauri

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How are Negative Customer Experiences Formed? A Qualitative Study of Customers' Online Shopping Journeys

Abstract

This study investigates how negative customer experiences are formed during customers' online shopping journeys. A qualitative, in-depth dataset collected from 34 participants was employed to identify negatively perceived touchpoints that contribute to the customer experience in a negative way. The findings reveal that negative touchpoints are experienced during customers' entire journeys, particularly after a purchase is completed. We identified 152 negative touchpoints from the data, of which 53 were experienced during search and consideration, 35 when finalizing a purchase, 33 during delivery, and 31 during after-sales interactions with the company. Within these four main categories, 20 subthemes describing the touchpoints and formation of customers' negative experiences were identified therein. The findings highlight the importance of understanding the holistic customer experience formation, including the before- and after-purchase phases of the online shopping journey. In practice, the findings can be utilized in online service design and improvement.

Keywords: Negative Customer Experience, Customer Journey, Touchpoints, Online Shopping, E-Commerce, Service Design

1 Introduction

The rapidly evolving consumption field, wherein customers are gaining more control and additional consumption opportunities, has created a significant need for researchers and firms to more thoroughly understand the customer experience and its formation. Understanding the customer experience has been assessed as "critical" [1] and placed at the core of a company's offering because top-quality interactions between a customer and a company are becoming increasingly expected along every step of the customer journey.

While the customer experience has been a frequently discussed topic in marketing and information systems research as well as management practice, the collective understanding of the customer experience nevertheless remains limited and fragmented, especially in the online consumption context [2,3]. Researchers have argued that, while the customer management discussion has strongly focused on the service provider perspective [4] and exploratory attempts to conceptualize and measure customer experience outcomes [1], the customer-oriented perspectives have attracted less attention. Therefore, it remains unclear what constitutes an experience from a customer's point of view [2] and how customers construct their experiences. Specifically, marketing researchers have recently called for a more thorough understanding of customer perspectives [4,5] and are increasingly recognizing the need to understand the holistic nature of the customer experience. Overall, understanding the customers' views including their wants and needs plays an important role in all kinds of businesses [6].

In the online context, the majority of past studies have consistently focused on examining customers' positive perceptions toward and beliefs about [7] online shops. Negative customer experience formation has been a scantily researched topic, although previous studies have sufficiently demonstrated the consequences of a negative customer experience, particularly in physical service environments; studies have, for example, indicated that customers' negative experiences can cause substantial damage to a company's reputation and relationship with their customers [8]. Negative experiences have also been demonstrated to affect customer loyalty [9] and influence complaining behaviors [10], repurchase intentions [11], and customers' attitudes toward a company [12]. Negative customer experiences are also frequently communicated to other customers [8], which increases the potential damage caused by a poor experience; today, online channels and social media specifically provide customers with opportunities for sharing their experiences in a fast and easy way. Hence, as the role of online consumption is becoming increasingly important, a more thorough understanding of the incidents that negatively contribute to a customer experience is vital for improving and designing online services that meet the needs of today's consumers.

To address the gaps in the customer experience literature, this paper investigates negative customer experience formation through a customer's lens. A qualitative, in-depth dataset collected from 34 participants is employed to identify negatively perceived touchpoints during customer journeys in an online shopping context. As this study highlights a customer's primary role as an experience constructor, and as experience formation is investigated through a customer journey perspective, this study contrasts with the dominant provider-led approaches that typically study the customer experience during a main service encounter (e.g., a store visit).

This study is structured as follows. First, the study's theoretical background is discussed, which includes both the customer experience and the customer journey. The study's methodology and findings are subsequently presented and, to conclude, the study's contributions and managerial implications are discussed.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Customer experience

The customer experience has been a popular research topic in marketing since the 1990s. Due to the advances in technology and the rise of e-commerce, this experience research has expanded from physical environments to online environments. While marketing researchers have investigated experience from the online consumption perspective [13], information systems research has discussed similar issues with a technological lens by, for instance, paying attention to the use of technology and the user experience [14,15]. As the word *experience* is both a noun and a verb in the English language, experience has been studied as both an outcome and as a process [16]. In this study, we regard customer

experience as an outcome; as a summary of all the meanings customers construct through their customer journeys, during which they interact with a firm or multiple firms through various touchpoints. Negatively perceived touchpoints generate negative meanings and add negative tones to the customer experience, while positively perceived touchpoints have the opposite effect.

It is commonly assumed in the marketing literature that firms can orchestrate an experience to its customers. Therefore, the key elements regarding a customer experience have often been studied with quantitative, predefined, firm-led attributes that measure customers' reactions (e.g., satisfaction) to service environment stimuli. In an online context, the antecedents and consequences of customers' online encounters have been sufficiently identified in various studies, and several models and measurements have been developed to understand the influence of specific firm actions and factors on the customer experience as an outcome [17,18]. Furthermore, many studies have investigated the interaction between online service providers and their customers [19,20] during the main service encounter, at which point the customer is directly interacting with the company.

However, despite great interest in the customer experience, researchers have argued that customer experience research nevertheless remains limited and fragmented in both online and offline contexts [3,5] due to the dominance of provider-oriented and quantitative approaches. According to Heinonen and Strandvik [4], consumption can include many other important activities and meanings other than those that are visible to the company through direct interactions with their customers. Therefore, when applying firm-based measurements to the customer experience, a limited understanding of the total customer experience is obtained, as it provides no information on how the customer experience is influenced by other actors and factors beyond the firm's control [21]. Thus, understanding how customer experiences are constructed through the entire customer journey—including the prepurchase and postpurchase stages—should constitute each company's main interest.

2.2 Customer journey

The customer journey represents the different phases that characterize an individual's interaction with a service, product, or brand in a certain context. The customer journey is formed through various touchpoints, which are incidents an individual perceives and consciously relates to a given firm or brand. Touchpoints allow customers to construct their experiences with a service, brand, or product because their opinions and perceptions are largely influenced by the contact that is made through touchpoints in different channels. Although customer journeys are interpreted in different ways in the literature and can be described by various scopes, a customer journey is typically characterized as a customer's flow his/her (1) prepurchase actions to the actual (2) purchase and further to the (3) postpurchase stage. As Lemon and

Verhoef [1] explain, prepurchase actions include need recognition, search, and consideration. The purchase phase includes a customer's interactions with the selected company during the purchase event and is characterized by actions such as choice, ordering, and payment. The postpurchase phase covers the interactions after making a purchase that relate in some way to the product or service itself. The postpurchase phase typically includes behaviors such as usage, consumption, and service requests.

Despite the widespread agreement that the customer journey must be understood across all touchpoints, most research has focused on parts of the journey in isolation [22]. The purchase phase has attracted significant attention in the marketing literature, as the influence of marketing activities and the servicescape on one's purchase decision has been of special interest to marketing researchers [1]. However, the proliferation of different channels has led to an explosion in the number of different touchpoints within the customer journey. Therefore, understanding the effects of diverse touchpoints in an equivalent manner is needed in order to holistically understand the customer journey. Today, customers operate in multichannel retail environments, which means they can interact with various companies through various channels during their customer journeys. Information is searched through one channel, purchase is executed through another channel, and the product is retrieved through a third channel. Tynan and McKechnie [23] note that managing the customer experience through its whole lifespan—including the before and after stages—is of great importance, and in-depth knowledge of customers is required to exert such efforts. Studying services from a customer's perspective is beneficial because it provides insights into customers' value creation processes and helps identify the important elements that affect the customer experience within the service context [21].

3 Methodology

As this study's purpose was to gain insights into the customer perspective in online shopping, a qualitative and interpretive research design was applied during data collection. Interpretive methods make sense of human experiences by collecting and analyzing narratives. To collect a versatile set of narratives, individual interviews (N=7), small-group interviews (N=9, two to three participants per group), and written essays (N=18) were used as data. The interview participants were recruited through mailing lists targeted to University of Jyväskylä's stakeholders, student groups, and staff, and the 500–1000-word essays were collected during a marketing course. The sample included Finnish consumers, 24 of whom were women and 10 of whom were men. The participants' ages varied from 21 to 68 years, but the majority (73.5%) were young adults under 30 years. Most were students (79%), which is explained by the chosen recruitment channels. Most participants visited online stores at least monthly (77%) and made online purchases on a monthly basis (65%). Therefore, the participants can be described as rather accustomed online shoppers, as is typical for Finnish consumers. The respondents' descriptive statistics are reported in Appendix 1.

Individual interviews and group interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes and were subsequently recorded and transcribed. Open-ended questions were asked to capture the participants' real-life experiences. All participants were asked to describe themselves as online shoppers and then recall and reflect their own experiences in online shopping by describing their positive and negative experiences as well as their emotions during their online shopping journeys. Because the participants retrospectively reflected on their experiences, the data describes real-life experiences and touchpoints that have remained in these customers' minds and can thus be regarded as important and meaningful events from the customer's perspective.

The data was analyzed with a thematic analysis alongside an inductive coding and analysis process. The analysis was performed with the NVivo software and was grounded in empirical data expressions, wherein the analysis unit was a sentence or statement articulated by a participant. The negatively perceived touchpoints were categorized following a multistep, iterative process wherein all the statements made by participants that described unpleasant and irritating situations during their customer journeys were collected from the data as well as grouped and regrouped multiple times based on their content. The final categorizations and findings are discussed in the following section.

4 Findings

The findings demonstrate that customers face various negatively perceived touchpoints throughout their entire online shopping journeys. Overall, 152 negatively perceived touchpoints were identified from the data. These touchpoints were grouped into four main categories based on the customer journey phases, including: (1) search and consideration (53 references), (2) finalizing the purchase (35 references), (3) delivery (33 references), and (4) after-sales interaction with the company (31 references). Within the main categories, 20 subthemes that describe the touchpoints were identified. The negative customer journey touchpoints are summarized in Appendix 2 and analyzed in detail in the following subsections.

4.1 Search and consideration

Search and consideration is a significant step in the customer journey. During this phase, customers compare various options and search for the best deal. Negatively perceived touchpoints can easily drive the customer to a competitor who is merely a couple clicks away in an online environment. Lack of information (27 references) and navigation difficulties (26 references) in online stores were identified as the main themes contributing to customer experience during the search and consideration phase.

Lack of information was strongly connected to inadequate product descriptions and was experienced on many levels. Undetailed written and pictorial descriptions as well as incorrect information were among the negative touchpoints. As online shoppers rely on product descriptions and pictures to understand what they are buying, copying product information from competitors' webpages, providing outdated information, and exclusively providing limited product information were all perceived as laziness and as signs of a poorly managed online store. The lack of information was considered as a significant buying barrier. The participants reported negative experiences when their wrong impression had led to unpleasant surprises upon receiving their orders, which were not as expected in terms of, for instance, material quality or product dimensions. Overall, the negligent product descriptions reduced customers' trust toward the online store, and some considered inadequate product information the greatest mistake an online store can make.

"If there's almost nothing told about the product, it's a sign of unreliability. It tells me about the shopkeeper's attitude towards his business." (Male, 49)

In addition to product-related content, lack of information was linked to communication with the company. Negative touchpoints were experienced specifically in situations wherein customers were unable to find contact information or receive a response from an online store. Such situations were determined critical in terms of customers' willingness to continue the shopping process with a particular online store. Some customers reported their use of simple e-mail questions as a tool to evaluate a store's service quality and trustworthiness; before ordering from a new shop, this was considered a useful practice for checking whether or not the store actually existed and provided decent customer service. The online store's inability to answer a customer's questions sufficiently or quickly on different channels was perceived as annoying. Chat services were commonly experienced as negative touchpoints because they had failed to provide answers to customers' questions in the expected timeframe.

"I don't have any good experiences. It's time consuming, as the same person is probably taking care of ten different chats at the same time." (Male, 26)

Navigation difficulties were explained by a store's confusing layouts and poor technical functionality. As online shoppers are accustomed to the same general patterns of navigation from their experiences on the online retail sites they regularly use, negatively perceived online stores were described as "messy," "recondite," "structurally confusing," and "difficult to use." Due to customers' high expectations toward the user interface, poor technical functionality, including download slowness, technical errors, and mobile incompatibility, was considered annoying and even unforgivable. Furthermore, distractions such as pop-ups, ads, and music were among the negative touchpoints that disturbed the shopping process.

“Those ads, all the flashing ads around...I’m so irritated! They are particularly annoying.” (Female, 40)

Online stores’ attempts to communicate with their customers during store visits were perceived as unwanted surprises and espionage. Pop-up chat boxes specifically aroused feelings of discomfort; “I feel I’m under espionage,” and “it feels intrusive” were typical customer viewpoints regarding pop-up chats. As many customers considered an online chat similar to dealing with a real person, rejecting the chat aroused discomfort and feelings of impoliteness.

4.2 Finalizing the purchase

Finalizing the purchase is a critical phase during the customer journey, as the customer has made a purchase decision and is willing to close the deal. The findings demonstrate that the checkout process is a key touchpoint of the online shopping journey. Negatively perceived touchpoints and the interruption of the purchase process at the “late stage” can cause the customer great disappointment due to his/her loss of both the desired product and the time spent on the shopping process. Negative incidents included unpleasant surprises, such as unexpected details concerning an order (e.g., lack of information and payment options). Unexpected terms of delivery (e.g., high shipping costs and service charges, destinations) were a typically negative touchpoint, especially when dealing with foreign online shops. The participants reported feeling betrayed on such occasions as well as being misled to desire something that could not ultimately be reached.

*“Sometimes you find out at the end that they do not deliver to Finland. Then you feel betrayed.”
(Female, 27)*

Identification procedures (e.g., including registration and passwords) were experienced as “frustrating,” “time consuming,” and “too complicated,” touchpoints. Much of this annoyance was connected to pressure caused by different sign-ins, as users today must remember many different usernames and passwords. Registration was also associated with spam mail and, as such, was avoided.

“The number of different passwords is overwhelming. I don’t want to create a single account anymore.” (Female, 34)

Technical errors at checkout were recalled as highly annoying; typical incidents of this nature included a store not accepting payment information or other details provided by a customer. For many customers, payment success was a threshold issue, and payment failure often led to termination of the customer–firm relationship.

“If I have problems with payment, I’ll never go back to that store.” (Male, 27)

Furthermore, invalid discount codes at checkout caused puzzlement and anger; “the code does not apply to these products,” “the code cannot be combined with other offers,” and “this code is valid only for purchases over X euros” were typical unpleasant experiences depicted by the participants.

4.3 Delivery

From a customer’s perspective, delivery is often the last mile of the customer journey that ultimately concludes the purchase process. Delivery is also the stage when the online shopping purchase becomes concrete on a physical level and requires some actions from the customer. The findings indicate that negative touchpoints at this stage can have a strong impact on the overall customer experience. Delivery speed and ease of pick-up were identified as especially meaningful to the participants. Slow shipping was reported as a factor that may “ruin the whole shopping experience,” especially if shipping is delayed. Overall, fast shipping and various shipping options were expected.

“I’m very annoyed, especially with Finnish companies, as they don’t provide immediate delivery...that a taxi brings it to me, no matter what it costs.” (Male, 49)

The convenience of delivery was found to be important because the customers wanted to receive their parcels without exerting special effort or wasting time, preferably in locations that were close to their everyday routes. Being forced to pick up the delivery from an unpleasant or inconvenient location and dealing with pricy customs were considered irritating potential side effects of delivery.

“The origin of a store itself does not matter as long as I do not have to pay high shipping costs or deal with customs. I am so stingy and lazy that these are threshold issues.” (Female, 23)

A lack of shipping information was also experienced negatively. The participants expressed that they desired transparency—that is, visibility into the size and status of a package throughout the whole delivery process. Some participants specifically linked the negative touchpoints to courier services, which were considered annoying due to their service processes. During these processes, the customer must make special arrangements, such as by setting up an appointment for the delivery or impatiently waiting for the delivery during a workday.

4.4 After-sales interaction with the online store

After-sales interaction continues a customer's relationship with a firm after a purchase has been completed. In this study, aggressive after-sales marketing, deficiencies in customer service, and complicated or expensive return procedures were identified as negative touchpoints of the customer journey.

Among the interviewed participants, aggressive after-sales marketing was considered damaging to the customer–firm relationship. Being on companies' contact lists was considered annoying, and “not being able to get rid of a store,” “too many advertisements sent by e-mail,” and “too many newsletters” surfaced as typical causes for irritation. “Only for you” advertisements caused special irritation among the young adults. As these were considered marketing tricks, companies sending such advertisements were interpreted as “underestimating the customer's intelligence.” Overall, many participants depicted the receipt of too many e-mails and advertisements from online stores as well as the spamming of customers as foolish and amateur.

“It should be pretty self-evident that no one likes it if they get e-mails [from the same firm] several times a week.” (Female, 24)

Contacting customer service after delivery was conveyed as displeasing, troublesome, and a measure that was exclusively taken when absolutely necessary. Some participants reported communication problems with customer service staff due to the staff's lack of knowledge and language skills. Poor translations and spelling mistakes in customer–firm communications were considered a sign of negligence, laziness, and poor service.

“There were spelling mistakes on my airline ticket. I got very nervous! I think it is totally incomprehensible to have errors on your airline ticket.” (Male, 23)

Online stores' inappropriate communication styles also caused irritation. Downplaying customers' problems and offering no apology when customers were disappointed stirred up negative emotions among the participants. When returning purchases, complicated returning procedures were identified as negative touchpoints. Thus, online shopping returns were an issue that participants carefully considered before finalizing a purchase, and the availability of cost-free returns was a considerable incentive to make a purchase.

5 Conclusions and managerial implications

This study's purpose was to increase the understanding of the customer experience formation in the online shopping context by examining negatively perceived touchpoints during customers' online shopping journeys. This study contributes to the existing literature by addressing the calls for understanding the customer's viewpoint alongside the holistic customer experience [4,24]. As previous research has dominantly studied the customer experience with provider-led approaches and while favoring customer experience measurements [17,18,25], the present study provides new insights by examining customer experience formation through multiple customers' viewpoints, as depicted by customers themselves. Our study adds to the small number of studies [2,26] that have focused on the customer experience from a customer's perspective in the online shopping context. Furthermore, this study contrasts earlier studies, which have focused on examining customers' positive perceptions and beliefs [7] of online shops. Investigating customer experience formation through customers' lenses provides important knowledge for academics and practitioners, as it helps us more thoroughly understand how customers make sense of services and what they find truly meaningful in a certain context. In this study, the customers retrospectively recalled their negative online shopping experiences. Therefore, the findings demonstrate what kinds of touchpoints during the customers' online shopping journeys generally remain in customers' minds. Understanding what these touchpoints are and how customers interpret them is useful due to their potential effect on customers' future choices regarding online shopping and online stores. Investigating the negative contributors to the customer experience is especially important, as the negative consequences of customers' negative experiences are sufficiently demonstrated in the existing literature [10,11,27].

This study's findings demonstrate that, from a customer's perspective, customer experience in online shopping context is built during the entire customer journey and not merely during an online store visit. Customers actively evaluate the entire path with a particular purchase, from the product search to the delivery and onward to other after-purchase activities. During the prepurchase phase, many negative incidents were expectedly related to the online store's appearance, technical functionality, and provided information. In line with previous literature [15], the findings highlight the importance of a finalized and clear user interface as well as carefully created content (e.g., product descriptions). As the aesthetic quality and functional designs of online stores continuously rise alongside customers' expectations of those stores, the provision of an attractive website design plays a key role in successful online sales and a firm's survival in the intensifying competition among online stores. During the purchase phase, the terms of delivery and a smooth check-out process were important touchpoints for determining the customer experience. Closing the sale is every retailer's ultimate goal as well as an important "moment of truth" for a customer because this stage finalizes the consideration process, which may at times last for days or even weeks. This study's findings, as do those of previous studies [28],

highlight the convenience of the checkout stage; all the complicated touchpoints that potentially dissuade the customer from completing the purchase should be identified and eliminated by the online store.

Whereas the previous literature has highlighted the phase during which the customer interacts with the main provider [1] (e.g., the online store), this study's findings indicate that partner companies may also play an important role in forming the customer experience. The findings demonstrate the importance of the delivery process, as a considerable amount of customer irritation in the participants' online shopping experiences was caused by shipping processes as well as unawareness and inconvenience related to those processes. In line with previous research [29], the findings reveal that the choice of delivery subcontractors as well as the ease of delivery are significant from the customer's perspective, as poor touchpoints (e.g., delivery delay) cause customer dissatisfaction [30]. Due to the technical advancements and rising standards in online consumption, customers are increasingly expecting quick and easy delivery solutions from online retailers despite the product they order or the industry to which the company belongs. In addition, customers' negative experiences with delivery are often attributed to the online shop from which a purchase is made, as the shop determines which options or services a customer can choose for the later stages of his/her customer journey. As depicted by this study's participants, partner companies are important when selecting the place of purchase. Hence, online stores should carefully choose their subcontractors (e.g., delivery partners). Furthermore, the after-sales communication between the online store and the customer plays an important role in forming the customer experience, as excessively aggressive advertising and return persuasion may negatively influence that experience.

Finally, this study demonstrates that the customer experience in online shopping does not purely occur "online". As negative incidents and touchpoints were linked to both online and offline touchpoints during the entire online shopping journey, online stores are advised to holistically consider their customers' journeys. It is important to understand how customers utilize the multiple service channels available to them, manage conflicts, and come to rely on particular service providers. Understanding the entire customer journey and the most important negative and positive, online and offline touchpoints therein is a key factor for the successful design and management of e-commerce services. Service design methods (e.g., customer journey mapping, including the depiction of customer activities, emotions, pain points, etc.), provide useful tools for online stores seeking to improve their services [31].

The customer insights gained through this study can be utilized and further investigated in research and practice aiming to more thoroughly understand online shopping behavior and customer experiences therein. The formation of customer experiences in the online context should be further studied within different customer groups, through various methods and in diverse service settings. Furthermore, the postpurchase phase of the customer journey specifically requires more attention from both practitioners and academics.

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Appendix 1. The descriptive statistics of the respondents (N = 34)

	N=34	%
Gender		
Male	10	29.4 %
Female	24	70.6 %
Age		
21–29 years	25	73.5 %
30–39 years	4	11.8 %
40–49 years	3	8.8 %
50–59 years	1	2.9 %
60– 69 years	1	2.9 %
Status		
Student	27	79.4 %
Employee	6	17.6 %
Retired	1	2.9 %
On average, how often do you visit online stores?		
Daily	1	0.5 %
Weekly	13	25.1 %
Monthly	16	51.6 %
Yearly	4	20.5 %
Less than yearly	0	2.3 %
On average, how often do you make online purchases?		
Daily	0	0.0 %
Weekly	3	8.8 %
Monthly	19	55.9 %
Yearly	12	35.3 %
Less than yearly	0	0.00 %

Appendix 2. Negative touchpoints during customers' online shopping journeys

