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INTRODUCING A SENSEMAKING PERSPECTIVE

TO THE SERVICE EXPERIENCE

ABSTRACT

Approach – The service experience literature is dominated by a focus on firms implementing service experiences for customers. This study, in contrast, investigates service experience and its formation from the customers' viewpoint: how service experiences are formed as a part of customers' everyday life and sensemaking processes instead of under service providers' control.

Purpose – Most recent service experience research considers customers as sensemakers and sensemaking as a focal process in experience construction. Despite this, the sensemaking theory engendered in organization studies has not been applied in the quest for an in-depth understanding of the service experience. This study introduces a sensemaking perspective to the service experience and develops a conceptualization of how customers construct their experiences cognitively through sensemaking.

Findings – Service experience is characterized as a mental picture—a collage of meanings created by a customer through the sensemaking processes. A sensemaking framework that characterizes service experience formation and its four seminal dimensions, including the self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective sensemaking, is introduced.

Originality – This article contributes to the service literature by introducing a new theoretical lens through which the service experience concept can be investigated and reframed.

1. Introduction

The service experience is a primary interest of today's marketing researchers and practitioners, as the power of today's customers is widely recognized, and the importance of a positive service experience is thus emphasized. Various service marketing studies have contributed to the discussion on service experience in recent decades (e.g., Grove and Fisk, 1997; Grace and O'Cass, 2004; Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005; Helkkula, 2011; McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2015). However, while the service experience phenomenon has attracted much interest, reviews of the current status of research on the service experience have concluded that the focus of mainstream research has been on service providers', rather than customers', perspectives (Mustak *et al.*, 2013; McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2019). This is the case even when the studies have claimed to apply the customers' viewpoints (Helkkula, 2011).

Deeper understanding and new approaches to the intertwined concepts of service experience and customer experience have been recently called for (see e.g., Jain *et al.*, 2017; Becker *et al.*, 2020; Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Ostrom *et al.*, 2021). In particular, there is a quest for empathic concepts that capture the essential role of customers' meaning creation, knowledge, feelings, and practices. This understanding has not yet been fully incorporated into service experience research because the provider emphasis dominates the field.

First, a bulk of empirical research has conceptualized and measured the service experience as an outcome (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) and sought to understand the influence of specific company actions and factors on customers' service experiences. Mainstream service experience studies have investigated how the service experience emerges in a service encounter and how the service experience can be improved through service elements of that encounter (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). The determinants of the service experience are often predefined, and the elements essential to the customers are not articulated by the customers themselves (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, service providers could benefit from the insights and weak signals that are conveyed

by emphatic understanding of customers. For example, explorations of customer knowledge, feelings, and practices during service experience construction foster the understanding of how value is formed subject to individual and contextual influences (Sandström *et al.*, 2008; Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2015). As Becker and Jaakkola (2020) noted, ignoring the customer view and the complexity of situational, temporal, and sociocultural contingencies can lead to missed value-creation opportunities in service design.

Second, studies have paid considerable attention to the outcomes that follow a particular kind of service experience for a company—for example, whether positive service experiences result in customers' repurchase intentions or positive word-of-mouth behaviors. In contrast, few studies have examined what the service experience means to the customers and what meanings—be they company related or noncompany related—it has for a customer's everyday life after service usage. While some conceptual studies have discussed how services are uniquely interpreted and experienced (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015) and recognized the importance of a customer's past and imaginary experiences, as well as active sensemaking processes (Ponsignon *et al.*, 2017), the customer sphere or customers' meanings have not been deeply investigated. Although it is widely agreed that service experiences are holistic in nature (e.g., Jain *et al.*, 2017), service researchers have not paid specific attention to customers' meaning creation—that is, how their thoughts and minds work during service experience construction and in their everyday lives. The prevalent mindsets, including the focus on service stimuli and service provider, have restricted studies from capturing what a customer truly experiences (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020).

Recent service studies, however, have paved new avenues and put more emphasis on the customer sphere by examining how services are uniquely interpreted and experienced (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015) and how customers embed service in their personal processes (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015; 2018). The customer-focused service experience approach has acknowledged services as relevant to customer well-being (Rahman, 2021) and considered the role of empathy in service experience

(Tan *et al.*, 2019). In a literature review of service experience studies, Lipkin (2016) identified a sensemaking perspective with reference to studies (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Helkkula and Kelleher, 2010; Helkkula *et al.*, 2012; Dube and Helkkula, 2015) that highlighted the phenomenological lifeworld context in which the customer is in control of experience construction. These studies emphasized customers' subjective, active, collective, and dynamic processes in which meanings are given to individual and social realities through experiential transportation back and forth in time (Lipkin, 2016).

Surprisingly, although the emerging perspective on service experience research considers customers as sensemakers and sensemaking as a focal process in experience construction, the sensemaking theory engendered in organization studies has not been applied in the quest for an in-depth understanding of the customer experience from a customer perspective. While previous customer and service experience studies (e.g., Pareigis *et al.*, 2012; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) have recognized the cognitive dimension of customers' experiences, customers' internal mechanisms have been scantly explored in previous research, with some exceptions (e.g., Pareigis *et al.*, 2012). Hence, this study strives to enhance and expand service experience research by suggesting the sensemaking theory as a lens for service experience studies. The present study introduces and discusses the essential elements and concepts of sensemaking and presents ideas on how they can be utilized to better incorporate the customer perspective into the service experience concept.

The literary background of this study relies on Karl Weick's view on sensemaking. The sensemaking perspective developed by Weick (1988; 1993; 1995; 2001; Weick *et al.*, 2005) has had a vast influence on organization studies (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015), where it is widely used to describe the meaning-creation processes of corporate employees (e.g., Weick, 1995; Weick *et al.*, 2005; Maitlis *et al.*, 2013; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). Therefore, the present study posits that the sensemaking approach

can be useful for studying customers' sensemaking as well. The approach is here applied to study customers' processes, through which the service experience (characterized here as a collage of meanings—a mental picture) comes into existence. We introduce a sensemaking framework that can help us better understand the different cognitive dimensions that are important in customers' service experience construction. The framework proposes that customers build their service experiences by mirroring a service through thoughts of themselves, the world around them, their past, and reflections on the future. Hence, the traditional focus on the service provider or on specific service encounters gives an overly limited picture of the service experience formation.

The suggested sensemaking approach provides a conceptual avenue for service scholars to move toward a more customer-dominant service logic (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015; 2018; 2020). This study extends the customer-driven view to service experience (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020) by revealing new aspects of service experience and paving a new avenue to study service experience. By investigating and capturing a customer's firsthand service experience formation with all its various nuances, service research is in a better position to equip service providers with insights that aid in designing meaningful and relevant services to gain a competitive advantage.

The following section introduces the sensemaking concept and identifies the key characteristics of sensemaking. Examining the nature of sensemaking highlights the elements of customers' meaning-creation processes in service experience formation. Based on the conceptual analysis, a framework of service experience formation is presented. The final sections address the novelty and implications of the proposed approach. Future research directions are also outlined.

2. What is sensemaking?

Sensemaking is commonly understood as the processes by which people give meaning to events or issues (cues) that they encounter and notice in their everyday lives and then act accordingly (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis *et al.*, 2013; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Brown *et al.*, 2015; Sandberg

and Tsoukas, 2020). The notion of sensemaking describes how individuals "try to understand," "think about," or "socially construct" things or situations. In the absence of a widely agreed-upon definition, the term *sensemaking* is often used as a general, undefined concept (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). In this study, sensemaking is applied in the context of service consumption and understood as the meaning-giving processes through which customers construct their service experiences (i.e., mental pictures associated with services).

According to Sandberg and Tsoukas (2020), two main theoretical approaches—cognitivism and constructionism—characterize sensemaking studies. Cognitivists understand sensemaking as a process of interpreting stimuli and constructing cognitive frames, whereas constructionists approach sensemaking as a language-mediated process of negotiating shared understandings and interpreting others' accounts. Despite the different approaches, sensemaking is understood as fundamentally concerned with language (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014), as it becomes evident through verbal and nonverbal (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gephart, 1993) narratives in which events and issues are assigned meaning and structure and "talked into existence" (Weick *et al.*, 2005). According to Weick (1993, p. 635), individuals tell stories of and for themselves "*to make things rationally accountable.*" Narratives allow individuals to organize events and issues into holistic and coherent accounts (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

From an individual's perspective, sensemaking is an ongoing, lifelong process in which an emerging story is continuously redrafted. We continuously attempt to understand the unknown elements around us (Weick, 2001). Consequently, sensemaking is commonly delimited to specific *episodes* (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015) or *sequences* (Weick, 2001) that allow a focus on a certain moment, period, or "snapshot" during the continuum: how sensemaking occurs in a particular context. According to Weick (2001), sensemaking roughly follows a sequence in which an individual engages in ongoing situations from which he or she extracts salient cues and makes plausible sense while enacting order into these situations. Thus, sensemaking can be investigated

as a process, wherein individuals notice environmental cues (such as service cues), make sense of them, and act accordingly (Weick, 1995; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Brown *et al.*, 2015; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). These phases of the sensemaking process overlap rather than occur as a linear continuum (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

The following subsections take a closer look at the sensemaking process. Sensemaking is here approached mainly from the perspective of its main theorist, Weick (1988; 1993; 1995; 2001; Weick *et al.*, 2005), who proposed that sensemaking has seven essential characteristics (Weick, 1995). It is 1) grounded in identity construction, 2) retrospective, 3) enactive of sensible environments, 4) social, 5) ongoing, 6) focused on and by extracted cues, and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. In addition to these, the prospective element (e.g., Weick *et al.*, 2005) of the sensemaking process is addressed in this study. Finally, we present a summary of the sensemaking process and studies on sensemaking (Table 1) and a conceptualization of service experience formation based on the sensemaking theory (Figure 1).

2.1. Noticing of cues

Weick (1995) regarded the environment as the initiator of sensemaking. Individuals engage in sensemaking when they are inspired by environmental cues (e.g., Weick, 1995; Weick *et al.*, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; 2020). During their everyday lives, people engage in *ongoing situations*, from which they notice and extract salient *cues* for closer attention, asking, "*What's going on here?*" There are different views on how peculiar a cue must be to give rise to sensemaking. Several authors have maintained that sensemaking begins when individuals notice novel, unexpected, or confusing events, issues, actions, or other cues (Weick, 1995) that interrupt their ongoing activities and draw their attention (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Some have argued that sensemaking does not necessarily require out-of-the-ordinary cues as initiators: sensemaking also occurs when events pass smoothly and safely without much unfamiliarity (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Rosness *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, even unexpected events do not necessarily trigger sensemaking because the experience of discrepancy is subjective;

sensemaking occurs when individuals "*encounter an ambiguous event or issue that is of some significance to them*" (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014 p. 76-77). A vast number of sensemaking studies have explored what situational factors are critical and how they influence sensemaking efforts in organizations. Such factors can include, for instance, context, language, politics, and technology (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

When reflecting on the role of cues in sensemaking and service experience studies, we can easily detect similarities. Both fields recognize that cues in our environment serve as inspiration for individuals, guiding their thinking and action. Services are often regarded as sets of cues or clues that are orchestrated by the service provider. Bitner (1990) regarded people and physical evidence as cues for customers, and several service studies (e.g., Bitner, 1990; Baker *et al.*, 2002; Ballantine *et al.*, 2015) have demonstrated how service cues (touchpoints) influence customers' perceptions. Hence, in line with the sensemaking literature, this study posits that service experience construction starts when the sensemaking process regarding a service starts—when the customer brackets and notices service cues through the senses and a service therefore becomes a part of the customer's reality. Customers can pick salient service cues from various sources—such as service environments, advertising, and social media—for closer attention. Furthermore, different services and the cues within them may give rise to distinct sensemaking, depending on how noteworthy the service cues appear to customers. Everyday services (such as riding a bus) and experience-centric services (such as visiting a concert) likely activate a customer's sensemaking in different ways.

2.2. Sensemaking
Sensemaking is characterized with meaning creation. According to Weick et al. (2005, p. 411-412), it involves "labeling and categorizing the streaming of experience" and connecting "the abstract with the concrete." In addition to labeling and categorizing, sense is made by building chunks of meanings (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

Weick noted that sensemaking is "grounded in identity construction," "retrospective," "enactive of sensible environments," and "social." Furthermore, Weick et al. (2005) noted that sensemaking can also include prospective elements. Based on these ideas, this study suggests that an individual's sensemaking can be characterized as 1) self-related, 2) sociomaterial, 3) retrospective, and 4) prospective. We suggest that individuals construct their service experiences through these dimensions.

2.2.1. Self-related sensemaking

Sensemaking is *grounded in identity construction* (Weick, 1995). An individual's understanding of the self guides sensemaking and is constructed through sensemaking (Weick, 2001). Accordingly, self-identity shapes the way meanings are interpreted and enacted (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Thurlow and Mills, 2009); it is the lens through which individuals make sense of the world. Self-related sensemaking can include reflections of possible selves (i.e., individuals' ideas of what they could be, what they would like to become, or what they are afraid of becoming) (Markus and Nurius, 1986) and the adoption of different roles and lenses (Oyserman *et al.*, 2012). Sensemaking studies have adopted individuals' and organizations' perspectives when addressing identity, including threats to identity (Weick, 1993), managerial sensemaking and occupational identities (Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998), narrative construction of identity (Brown, 2004), professional identities (Korica and Molloy, 2010), identity and well-being (Rothausen *et al.*, 2017), and organizational identity construction (Kjærgaard *et al.*, 2011).

In line with the sensemaking theory, this study suggests that service experience formation includes considerations of the self, which influences how individuals interpret and enact meanings (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Thurlow and Mills, 2009) regarding a service. Self-related sensemaking can include considerations of oneself as a customer or user of the service as well as evaluations of one's actions related to the service. These reflections influence what kind of meanings, such as positive or negative, are attached to a service or service provider. For example, if a service boosts a customer's

self-esteem, it most likely has a positive effect on the overall service experience, whereas a decrease in self-esteem has the opposite effect.

2.2.2 Sociomaterial sensemaking

In addition to its connections to the self, sensemaking is *social* and linked to an individual's interaction with the environment and its actors (Weick, 1995). Individuals' sensemaking is embedded with a variety of cultural meanings, including the general customs, traditions, and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time stored in the environment (Ivanova-Gongne, 2015). Sandberg and Tsoukas (2020) suggested that the environment in which sensemaking takes place is a combination of different practice worlds that involve people, objects, and tools. These practice worlds direct the ways in which individuals give meaning to what they do and who they are. Sociomaterial sensemaking enables individuals to understand their own roles in the environment and make sense of what is happening there.

Correspondingly, service experience formation can be regarded as shaped by the sociomaterial environment—that is, the (surrounding) world in which the customer operates. Sociomaterial cues and considerations give rise to meanings that customers attach to services and service providers (e.g., how the service appears when viewed as part of societal trends, in relation to topical phenomena, or when compared to other services).

2.2.3 Retrospective sensemaking

Weick (1995) initially characterized sensemaking as *retrospective*. The retrospectivity of sensemaking can be understood on two levels. First, retrospectivity refers to the moment when sensemaking begins. Weick (1995) suggested that an individual first faces a new cue for sensemaking of the cue to take place. Thus, meanings are assigned to cues that are observed and—immediately after that, retrospectively—reflected upon and considered. From this perspective, sensemaking always involves retrospective elements. Second, sensemaking builds on an individual's past. Previous experiences and mental models acquired during one's life (Weick *et al.*,

2005) are used in framing and forming a coherent picture of the encountered new situation (Woodside, 2001; Steigenberger, 2015). Retrospective sensemaking thus includes remembering and revisiting the past.

Because sensemaking builds on and includes a recollection of past events and experiences, it is suggested that retrospective sensemaking is an important dimension of service experience formation. An individual's understanding guides and defines the process and what appears "worthy of sensemaking" (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) in a service context. Also, existing knowledge and understanding are retrospectively exploited while constructing one's service experience.

2.2.4 Prospective sensemaking

In addition to Weick's (1995) initial note of retrospective sensemaking, later studies have maintained that sensemaking also includes *prospective* dimensions (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Wright, 2005; Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Prospective sensemaking refers to considerations through which meanings regarding the future are created (Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Rosness *et al.*, 2016). Prospective sensemaking involves structuring the future by imagining a desirable state (Gioia and Mehra, 1996), creating images and scenarios (Gephart *et al.*, 2010), picturing events that may occur (Rosness *et al.*, 2016), considering the probable future impacts of certain actions or nonactions (Gioia *et al.*, 1994), and forming expectations (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). These processes require the ability to mentally construct the future as if it had already occurred (Gioia *et al.*, 2002), and envisioning and imagining constitute essential parts of this process (Gioia *et al.*, 1994).

Following the notion that sensemaking includes future-oriented considerations, this study posits that service experience formation includes prospective sensemaking. When customers construct their service experiences, they can engage in imagining future events and behaviors, and these considerations can have an important role in shaping the service experience. For instance, if the

service stimulates a customer's imagination and evokes strong positive images about future events, these thoughts may steer the service experience in a positive direction.

2.3 Sensemaking outcomes: meanings and actions

Sensemaking produces plausible meanings and actions as outcomes (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Weick (1995) argued that sensemaking is *driven by plausibility rather than accuracy*. Rather than discovering the truth, it is about creating a believable account of the encountered cues that helps the sensemaker act. The created meanings are discursive constructions of reality (Maitlis, 2005) in which the outcomes of meaning creation are turned into words and salient categories. Meanings describe how individuals simplify and understand a complex world. Therefore, sensemaking efforts can produce rich and unitary accounts or accounts that lack cohesion (Sandbeng and Tsoukas, 2015).

Once a credible understanding of the encountered cues has been created (plausible meanings), the created meanings begin to guide behavior, resulting in action or nonaction (Weick, 1995; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Action can be understood on two levels: as a social process in which the outcomes of one's sensemaking are manifested through speech and interaction between individuals, or as the result of sensemaking that is reflected in an individual's physical behavior (Weick, 1995). By undertaking action, individuals *enact order into situations* and their reality. They bring events and structures into existence and make them visible to others (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking produces prerequisites—new cues—for future sensemaking and actions of individuals (Weick, 2001; Weber and Glynn, 2006; Malsch *et al.*, 2012). Thus, individuals themselves determine how reality unfolds (Weick, 2001). While the sensemaking concept is sometimes used interchangeably with *interpretation*, enactment is one of the aspects unique to sensemaking. Thus, interpretation is an important component of sensemaking but is not an equivalent concept (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014).

This study proposes that the meanings generated during the (previous and present) sensemaking process constitute a customer's service experience of the moment, essentially depicting how a customer perceives the service at that particular point in time. The service experience is a collage of meanings, "a mental picture" that a customer associates with a service. The service experience guides customers' behavior and can result in action or nonaction.

2.4 A conceptualization of service experience formation based on the sensemaking theory

Based on the sensemaking approach, service experience creation is activated when a service is recognized by the customer: when a service becomes a part of a customer's cognitive reality after service cue recognition (e.g., Weick, 1995; Weick *et al.*, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; 2020). The service experience is constructed by a customer's retrospective, prospective, self-related, and sociomaterial sensemaking during the customer journey (e.g., Weick, 1995; Henningsen *et al.*, 2006; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Merkl-Davies *et al.*, 2011; Weick, 2012; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020).

In line with the sensemaking literature, this study characterizes *service experience* as abstract, meaning that it can comprise information from/about any source. The service experience includes meanings that are directly linked to the service but also other meanings that are created when facing service cues. Each service experience formation process has its own characteristics and consequences. Enactments, which can be actions or nonactions, follow an individual customer's sensemaking and create reality and new service cues for other customers.

To summarize the incorporation of the sensemaking theory into service experience, we present the main studies discussing the sensemaking process and its essential elements (self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective sensemaking) in Table 1. The conceptualization of service experience formation is depicted in Figure 1.

Characteristic of a sensemaking process	Core conception(s)	Examples of studies
1. Noticing of cues	Individuals engage in sensemaking when they are inspired by environmental cues.	Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; 2020
2. Sensemaking		
Self-related sensemaking	Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction: it is influenced by a person's sense of self. An individual's understanding of the self guides sensemaking and is constructed through sensemaking.	Weick, 1993, 1995; Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998; Brown, 2004; Weick et al., 2005; Patriotta and Spedale, 2009; Korica and Molloy, 2010; Kjærgaard et al., 2011; Rothausen et al., 2017
Sociomaterial sensemaking	Sensemaking is always linked to an individual's interaction with the environment and its actors. Sociomaterial environment guides sensemaking, and an individual's understanding of the sociomaterial environment is constructed through sensemaking.	Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; 2020
Retrospective sensemaking	Occurs on two different levels: 1) Sensemaking always includes a retrospective element, as meanings are assigned to cues that are first observed and then (after) retrospectively reflected upon. 2) Sensemaking builds on an individual's past—it is a process in which previous experiences and mental models that have been acquired during one's life experience are used in framing and forming a coherent picture of the encountered new situation.	Weick, 1995; Woodside, 2001; Weick et al., 2005; Henningsen et al.; 2006 Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Steigenberger, 2015; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; 2020
Prospective sensemaking	Prospective sensemaking includes meaning creation, in which the attention and concern of an individual is primarily directed at events that may occur in the future.	Weick et al., 2005; Wright, 2005; Gephart et al., 2010; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Rosness et al., 2016; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020
3. Sensemaking outcomes: meanings and actions		
Meanings	Sensemaking results in plausible meanings, specific sense or non-sense.	Weick, 1995; Maitlis, 2005; Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014
Actions (enactment)	Sensemaking is a springboard for action. By undertaking action, individuals enact their realties.	Weick, 1995; Weick, 2001; Weick et al., 2005; Weber and Glynn, 2006; Malsch et al., 2012

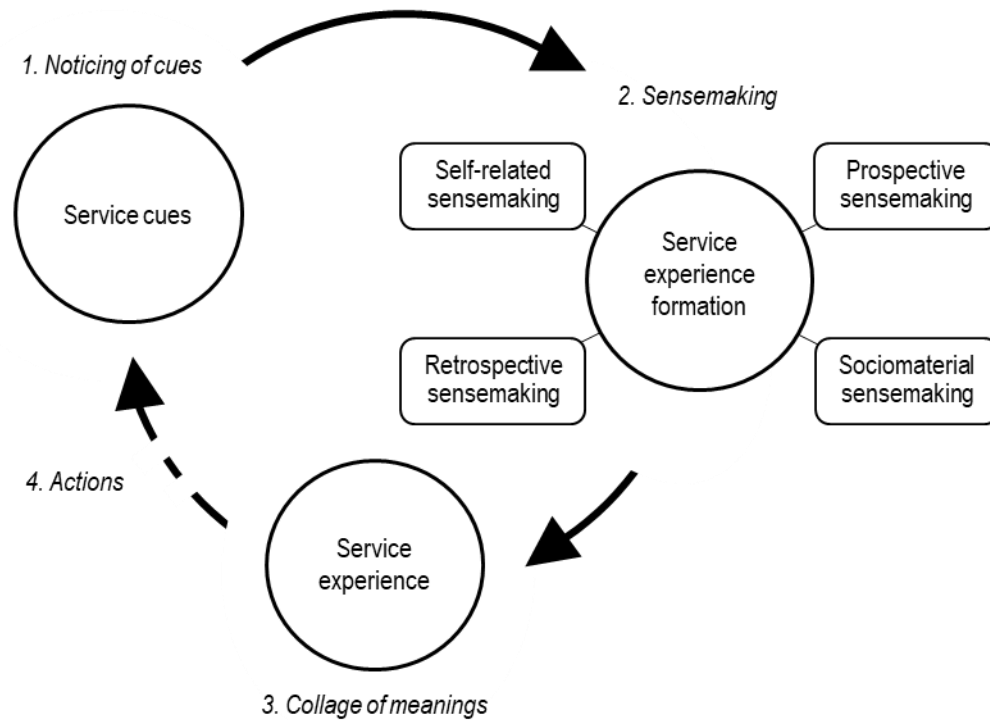Table 1 The key characteristics and studies of sensemaking

Figure 1. A conceptualization of service experience formation based on the sensemaking theory

3. Theoretical contributions

3.1 Key features of the sensemaking perspective and its contribution to the service experience literature

This study examines the sensemaking theory as a new avenue to study customers' service experience and its formation. Theoretical contributions are made in two domains: the customer-centric approach to service experience and sensemaking as a framework for service experience. First, this paper contributes to the service experience literature by investigating service experience from the customers' viewpoints in contrast to the service provider approach, which dominates the current literature. This is accomplished by presenting the sensemaking approach, which puts emphasis on customers' control in service experience formation: how service experiences are formed as a part of customers' everyday lives and sensemaking processes instead of under service providers' control. Second, the framework informed by the sensemaking theory depicts service experience formation: how customers construct their experience through sensemaking. The use of

sensemaking concepts helps clarify the service experience concept by separating service experience formation (process) from service experience (outcome). The sensemaking approach allows us to identify four dimensions of service experience formation: self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective sensemaking. The sensemaking framework also highlights the cognitive nature of service experience and thus contrasts the previous studies characterizing service experience as a multidimensional construct in which cognition is only one component of service experience.

3.2 Deepening the customer-centric approach to service experience

This study responds to the recent call for better understanding and new customer-focused approaches to the service experience (see e.g., Jain *et al.*, 2017; Becker *et al.*, 2020; Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Ostrom *et al.*, 2021). Using customers' viewpoints to study service experience is warranted because the service provider emphasis dominates the study field, focusing the attention mainly on the provider-related meanings and observable outcomes. This has resulted in a narrow scope to service experience phenomena, where positivist metatheoretical assumptions are applied and service experience is seen as a response to managerial service stimuli (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). However, the latest literature includes important notions about the subjectivity of the service experience and depictions of the service experience as created with elements that the service provider can and cannot control (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Hence, this paper leads the way to investigations that place customers into focus and include customers' meanings and activities beyond the company.

While service research has conceptualized and measured service experience as an outcome and paid special attention to the role of service cues (e.g., the appearance of the physical service environment or service staff behavior) as causes for outcomes (i.e., customer satisfaction, repurchase intention, and word of mouth [WOM] behavior), this paper augments the view by focusing on processes through which customers construct their service experiences. Because service experiences are built in the course of their everyday lives, customers focus on their own

life spheres, which include service providers but also other actors and elements. Importantly, these actors and elements are not visible to the service provider, so a review of the service experience is incomplete if it focuses only on the service provider. Hence, the sensemaking approach is designed to identify the multidimensional sensemaking processes and meanings—both those inspired by the provider and those inspired by the other actors and events in the sociomaterial environment—that customers incorporate to their service experiences. Contrary to the provider-focused research, the core of service experience formation is shifted beyond the service company and its offering. The sensemaking framework is aligned with the customer-dominant logic (CDL) of service, in which the main interest is how services become embedded in the customers' contexts and activities, and the implications of those for service companies (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2020). CDL notes that services should be dominated by customer-related aspects and build according to customers' logic (i.e., their reasoning and sensemaking). The sensemaking approach advances the CDL stream by providing a lens to study processes and activities that are not visible and immediately apparent to the service provider.

3.3 Sensemaking as a framework for service experience

The sensemaking framework contributes to the service experience literature by redefining the service experience formation concept and identifying dimensions of service experience formation.

First, service experience has been defined in many ways in previous studies, and research on the subject is incoherent, as the service experience concept is seen as either a process or an end state (see e.g., Helkkula, 2011). The sensemaking conceptualization clarifies the service experience concept because it suggests that the process of service experience *formation* and the *outcome* of that process should be separated conceptually, instead of using the service experience concept for both cases. Regardless of whether the sensemaking approach is applied, is it useful to make visible whether a study focuses on *service experience formation* (i.e., *how* customers construct their

service experiences and what the elements and dimensions are in that process) or *service experience* (i.e., *what* the outcome of the process is like).

Second, based on the sensemaking literature (e.g., Weick, 1995; Henningsen *et al.*, 2006; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Merkl-Davies *et al.*, 2011; Weick, 2012; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020), this study proposes four dimensions of service experience formation: self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective sensemaking. These dimensions describe the themes in relation to service experience and through which customers construct their service experiences.

The sensemaking framework incorporates the aspect of customers' *self-related sensemaking* in service experience formation. Previous studies have focused on the external and physical service cues influencing experiences (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020), but the sensemaking theory sheds light on the view that customers' perceptions of themselves have an essential role in service experience construction. This dimension of the sensemaking approach is useful in illuminating how services intertwine with customers' understanding of themselves and their position in the social and cultural milieus. Recent service experience studies emphasizing the customer perspective have characterized service experience as personal, subjective, and internal (Lipkin, 2016) but have failed to consider the identity construction aspects of service experience formation and tackle the self-reflections of customers and their positioning of themselves in the context of different services. As Heinonen et al. (2013) noted, service providers should aim for a holistic understanding of the customers' lives in which service is embedded: what customers do with the service in their own context to reach their own goals.

The second dimension of service experience formation is *sociomaterial sensemaking*. Service experience formation is guided by the sociomaterial environment and includes considerations regarding the sociomaterial environment. This perspective allows us to see the service experience from a "helicopter view" (Schmitt, 1999) and understand how it is shaped by the context around it.

The sociomaterial environment is not static but changing over time. The sensemaking perspective can provide insights into various invisible and changing drivers of the service experience, such as culture, society, trends, and topical issues that customers perceive as relevant. While previous studies have investigated how other customers (e.g., Grove and Fisk, 1997; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2010; Brocato *et al.*, 2012) and service environments (e.g., Novak *et al.*, 2000; Pareigis *et al.*, 2011; Bustamante and Rubio, 2017) affect the service experience, multiple other connections between customers and their environments have received less attention. The sensemaking perspective can serve as a starting point for further explorations of the sociomaterial environment and how customers' considerations regarding the phenomena occurring there become a part of service experience formation. Becker and Jaakkola (2020, p. 638) considered customer-centric experience to involve "customers' deliberate and spontaneous responses and reactions to offering-related stimuli." The sensemaking approach goes deeper to examine the mental processes through which cues in the sociomaterial environment become merged into service experience.

The sensemaking framework adds the temporal dimension to service experience formation by considering customers' *retrospective and prospective sensemaking*. These dimensions add understanding of service experience formation by showing how customers link services to their past and future and how those considerations become a part of service experience. In contrast to the sensemaking approach presented in this study, previous studies have addressed the temporal dimension of the service experience from a provider's viewpoint by recognizing different visible phases (before, during, and after purchase) during which an experience is constructed (Åkesson *et al.*, 2014; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) along the customer journey. This may emanate from early theoretical views that service takes place in human-to-human interactions in the provider's setting and service experience is based on discrete service encounters. Furthermore, previous studies have typically focused on the moment of consumption and the purchase period (i.e., when a customer is at a store) and what happens during that main encounter (Jain *et al.,* 2017). The chronological phases of service experience formation can be useful for understanding what happens in each stage

(e.g., before, during, after service usage), but such logic is not relevant as regards a customer's perspective and sensemaking. Rather than focusing on the temporal phases of the service process, the sensemaking framework emphasizes temporality as a cognitive phenomenon, implying that customers view services through their own life histories and ideas about future.

The sensemaking framework posits that customers' previous experiences in life, memories, and emotional ties are used as a part of service experience formation. Service cues can evoke memories of a lived life, and through that, the service is associated with meanings related to a customer's own history. Furthermore, memories of different services and their use moments can be used as criteria when selecting between different service providers and evaluating service offerings.

Future-oriented sensemaking directs the attention to the role of customers' creativity and imagination in service experience formation. Despite the notion about consumption experience being "a phenomenon directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings, and fun" (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982, p. 132), the role of customers' imagination has remained a poorly understood and ignored topic (Zaltman, 2016; Philips, 2017), especially regarding the service experience. The provider-oriented view has characterized service experience as a straightforward and rational reaction based on real-world events and "facts" (e.g., poor customer service results in a negative service experience). Furthermore, customers' future or after-service actions have been approached by focusing on customers' repurchase and WOM intentions. Hence, the sensemaking perspective highlights the imaginary and irrational side of the service experience formation: how services inspire customers to imagine their futures and how those considerations shape the service experience.

3.4 Service experience as a cognitive construct

The sensemaking framework regards service experience as a cognitive construct, suggesting that service experience exists only when a service is cognitively recognized and considered. This approach differs from the views in previous studies that define service experience as

multidimensional (i.e., having cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social dimensions) (e.g., Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2019). Although the brand experience research acknowledges the "mental image" perspective in a similar way as the sensemaking perspective, brand experience definitions are often based on the aforementioned dimensions. For example, Brakus et al. (2009, p. 53) defined *brand experience* as "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli." The sensemaking approach, in contrast, regards the cognitive dimension as the core of service experience formation, and other dimensions are its antecedents and consequences.

It is consistent with the sensemaking theory (e.g., Weick, 1995; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014), that the sensorial and behavioral activities are needed to build a service experience: senses, physicality, and behaviors are needed in exploring the surroundings (e.g., to notice service cues). However, the sensemaking approach to service experience regards cognitive activity as essential, and thus just being physically present or sensing the environment is not enough for a service experience to emerge. Likewise, emotions need to be cognitively recognized and made sense of in order to exist. The social dimension is also important in building the experience: services are often consumed with others, and social influences affect meaning creation through cultural traits, traditions, norms, and unspoken practices. However, rather than being the core of individuals' service experiences, the social dimension guides the service experience construction as an aspect of the sociomaterial sensemaking.

To conclude, the sensemaking approach provides concepts and tools for researchers to apply customer-dominant service logic (Heinonen et al., 2010; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015; 2018; 2020) in future research, by shifting the focus from the service to the customer and their personal, multi-contextual reality (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013). The sensemaking approach conceptualizes customers' internal self-related considerations, contextual sociomaterial considerations, and temporal considerations in service experience and provides means to study embeddedness of

services in consumers' lives (Heinonen et al., 2010; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2020) and facilitate insight into the customers' lifeworlds (Helkkula *et al.*, 2012). In the following section, we outline implications that can encourage further studies and service management to extend the customer-driven view to service experience and find a more nuanced view (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020) of service experience formation by applying the sensemaking perspective.

4. Future research directions and managerial implications

The sensemaking framework depicting service experience formation is a flexible approach that can be used to capture customers' holistic experiences and thus extend the previous customer-focused service experience theorizing (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). The framework can serve as a source for new research topics for theoretical and empirical investigations. Likewise, it offers versatile implications for adopting and managing customer-centric service designs and enhancing customers' positive service experiences. The suggestions for future studies and service managers are discussed next and summarized in Table 2.

First, while this study focused on scrutinizing service experience formation, further studies are needed to examine service cues located in the sociomaterial environment and how they become a part of service experience formation. Essential themes include identifying those service cues and cue-producers that are truly relevant to customers' sensemaking in different service contexts. While several service studies (e.g., Bitner, 1990; Baker et al., 2002; Ballantine et al., 2015) have demonstrated how service cues influence customers' perceptions, future studies should reconsider the role of the main service provider and provider-controlled cues in service experience formation. Studies on the topic are important, as technological development in particular has directed service experience formation beyond service providers' boundaries and direct face-to-face interactions (van Doorn *et al.*, 2017). A case in point is digital services based on self-service, where customers themselves control the entire service process in user interfaces. The context of service experience

formation in these cases is very different from traditional physical service settings, as services are used at customers' own premises (e.g., at home) and through customers' own equipment (e.g., mobile phone). In physical service settings, online content, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) create novel conditions for service experience formation. Also, many services are implemented today using both online and offline (omni) channels and business partners. In online shopping, for instance, the after-purchase phase and delivery services can play a significant role in the formation of service experience. Hence, the role of new technology, business partners, and other actors as cue providers and the inspiration of customers' service experience formation is a seminal topic.

A comprehensive understanding of service cues—both those created by the service provider and those created by others—and their role in customers' service experience construction is prominent for service management. Positive service experiences can be promoted only when there is sufficient understanding of how, when, and where customers encounter service-related cues during their everyday lives. The identification of service cues helps us understand the relevant building blocks of the service experience. By examining the cues, we can identify regularities, pain points, and trends in service experience formation: what factors direct it at different stages of the customer journey. This knowledge is essential in service design and helps us understand the formation of service experience as a whole, across different elements in the sociomaterial environment. By recognizing the important cues and the places where customers encounter them in the sociomaterial environment, service providers can promote the discoverability of their services as well as seek to eliminate the unfavorable service cues.

Second, this study proposes that customers construct their experience cognitively through self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective considerations. Studies could expand the understanding of these sensemaking dimensions by examining their roles, sub-dimensions, and possible intersections in customers' service experience construction. Further exploration of and

supplements to the sensemaking framework can uncover other important sensemaking dimensions besides those identified in this study. The applicability of the framework needs to be examined in different service contexts. Future studies could dig deeper to unveil how sensemaking manifests itself in empirical service contexts. Being a patient in a hospital or visiting a familiar supermarket most likely include different kinds of sensemaking processes, and different themes are thus highlighted in the service experience construction. The sensemaking framework can be applied broadly to study different kinds of service cases. It can be utilized, for instance, to study service experience formation during individual service encounters or during customer journeys.

Directing customers' service experience formation in a positive direction is vital for service managers. This goal cannot be achieved without understanding the flow of customers' thoughts regarding the service or during the use of the service. The sensemaking dimensions help outline customers' reflections and can be used as a tool to identify the main themes included in service experience formation. From a managerial perspective, it is important to have a tool to investigate and map the customers' sensemaking processes and apply this knowledge in business practices with service design. Service providers should research and consider what kind of self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective reflections their service causes in customers. Examining these issues provides insight into "walking in customers' shoes": how customers link the service to their daily lives, histories, futures, and various phenomena in the sociomaterial environment. These insights help service providers in profiling the mindset and ecosystem of the customer (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013) and gaining emphatic understanding of their customers (Bove, 2019). By understanding customers' mindsets, companies are in a better position to support customers' positive sensemaking in regard to their businesses.

Third, while service experience as an outcome has been thoroughly examined in previous studies (e.g., in terms of whether a customer is satisfied), the sensemaking framework can also be utilized to take these studies further. The framework helps in moving from measuring mainly service

provider–related outcomes toward grasping the multidimensional content included in customers' service experiences (collage of meanings), including the self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective meanings. A customer judges and evaluates service (e.g., whether the service experience is positive, negative, or neutral) on the basis of multidimensional conclusions.

Acknowledging service experience as a "collage of meanings" allows service providers to analyze the nuances of service experience. Such insights are important in empathic service design where the customers' ideas, ideals, needs, and desires are the starting point of a design process. The empathic approach is important in all services, including non-commercial, societal and public services, as they directly affect people's well-being and quality of life (Rahman, 2021).

Fourth, while the actions that follow from a service experience are not the core interest of this study, the consequences of a particular type of service experience (e.g., positive or negative) are of interest to service researchers. The previous research has well investigated the consequences from the service provider perspective (e.g., customers' repurchase and WOM intentions). In contrast, this study highlights the importance of studying the consequences and actions from the customers' viewpoint, to uncover how service experiences result in action in the customers' own life contexts, beyond the service provider. An important question is how customers themselves create service-related cues in the case of positive or negative sensemaking, as those cues create reality for other actors in the sociomaterial environment. How to investigate and analyze the practical consequences of customers' sensemaking is of interest to service providers as well.

In summary, the sensemaking approach enables versatile research on the service experience. Method-wise, the sensemaking framework is best suited for open-ended, inductive approaches to service experience. To uncover service experience and its formation, and firsthand information, qualitative methods, such as customer diaries and recordings, can be implemented. Technical tools, such as apps or games, could be utilized to capture customers' real-time cue recognition and sensemaking processes and the outcomes of those processes. These tools can foster novel ideas for

investigating the content of service experience formation and service experience. In practice, the sensemaking framework (Figure 1) can be utilized as a service design canvas that helps in defining the important elements of service experience and its formation. In addition, the sensemaking framework can be used as inspiration for customer-centric service experience measurement scales.

Future studies are encouraged to build on the conceptualization presented in this article. Also, while this study introduced a sensemaking framework to the service experience, additional frameworks and perspectives are welcomed to complement this view in addressing the gap in customer understanding. In particular, future studies should provide lenses and theories where the scope of service experience investigation is in the customers' everyday lives and ecosystems.

Theme of interest	Research questions	Managerial questions
1. Service cues Service cues relevant to the service experience construction	• How do different service cues inspire customer sensemaking? • What kind of cues are essential or irrelevant to customers' sensemaking? • Who creates the meaningful cues (e.g., service provider of some other actor)? • In what situations do customers encounter and notice the important service cues?	• How does one identify service cues that are relevant to customers? • How does one create relevant service cues? • How does one help customers find service cues? • How does one manage service cues that are created by other actors (e.g., subcontractors, customers themselves)?
2. Service experience formation Sensemaking processes through which service experience is constructed	• How do customers build their service experiences through self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective sensemaking? • What kind of considerations and reflections do the different sensemaking dimensions include? What are their sub-dimensions? • Are the different sensemaking dimensions equal? Are some of them more essential or irrelevant? • Are there other sensemaking dimensions besides those identified in this study? What are they?	• How does one identify and emphatically understand customers' service experience formation, including the self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective reflections? • How does one arouse and support customers' positive sensemaking? • How does one manage customers' negative sensemaking?
3. Service experience The content of service experience at a certain moment	• What kinds of meanings do service experiences consist of? • What are the self-related, sociomaterial, retrospective, and prospective meanings in service experiences?	• How does one investigate and identify meanings that are emphasized in customers' service experiences?

4. Customers' actions The consequences of service experience	• How does sensemaking result in practical action? • How do customers create new service cues based on their (positive/negative) senses made?	• How does one gain understanding of the service experience outcomes in the customers' context?

Table 2. Ideas for future studies and service managers.

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