Understanding the Customer Journey to Create Excellent Customer Experiences in Bookshops

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Abstract

This study investigates the customer journey and identifies the drivers of excellent customer experience in bookshops. Five research methods—in-depth interview, focus group, participant observation, Zaltman metaphors elicitation technique, and collective stereographic photo essay—were run on eleven Italian bookshops involving more than 1 100 individuals overall. The contribution of this study is twofold. First, it illustrates the process to adopt when mapping the customer journey and analyzing the customer experience. Specifically, it proposes that customer experience can be deeply understood only via a broad research design involving several different profiles of participants, that are managers and booksellers, customers of different familiarity with bookshops (infrequent, frequent and loyal customers), people that were not familiar with the investigated bookshops but that have been invited on purpose, and people that have special interactions (café and events) with the bookshops. Second, results show three key aspects of the topic: (1) The customer experience world, based on rituals not on transactions; (2) The drivers of excellent customer experience in bookshops, which are customization, integration, and participation; (3) The complex role and broad competences of the ideal bookseller.

Keywords: bookshops, customer experience, customer journey, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Since it firstly appeared in consumer behavior literature more than thirty years ago (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), the customer experience is attracting increasing level of attention, till it has recently become one of the main concepts in marketing. Indeed, a recent study by Bain & Company shows that providing customers with excellent experiences results for companies in 4-8% revenues growth above the average of their markets (Debruyne & Dullweber, 2015).

Although at the beginning scholars focused their attention on its specific aspects, thus giving rise to a very fragmented literature, over the years contributors now agree on the need of a general and comprehensive conceptualization of customer experience. Indeed, it is now defined as customer's subjective cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to any direct or indirect interaction with the brand or the company, across the full range of touch-points (Lemke, Clarke, & Wilson, 2011; Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

On the one hand such an inclusive definition suggests companies to take into account the whole process, and the entire relationship with customers, pointing out the urgent need of integrating the design and management of multiple touch-points in a holistic framework (Rawson, Duncan, & Jones, 2013; Voss & Zomerdijk, 2007). Toward that goal, companies must first plan clearly their brand strategy and market orientation, and then execute them accurately. However, the route towards success is cobbled with many obstacles that ask for managers' continuous attention, as already reported by the 2016-2018 research priorities of the Marketing Science Institute. There are at least three main difficulties to reach excellent customer experiences. First, consumers play a relevant active role in co-creating their experiences, resulting not only in the customer' active participation to the experience designed by the company, but also to the active participation of other consumers to that experience (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Such an aspect might generate a different—sometimes even the opposite—customer experience from the one designed and planned internally (Verhoef et al., 2009; Zomerdijk & Voss 2010). Only if managers capture the external signals early and in real time and then get ready when they occur, those difficulties can be dealt with. Second, customers bring into the experience their whole world of cognitive and affective processes, giving rise to multidimensional responses with which companies are not familiar (Bolton, Gustafsson,

McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, & Tse, 2014). Understanding the customers' voice and observing their behaviors might still be difficult to marketing managers nowadays, but they know how to deal with these aspects: Purchases, complaints, or even intentions to recommend are customers' responses that companies know at least how to register and analyze through their KPIs such as revenues, NPS, and so on. Instead, understanding and analyzing the most affective dimensions of customers' reactions to experiences might be a completely different process, for which different competences and tools are needed, for which companies might not be ready. Third, the proliferation of convenient and cheap channels for consumers to interact with companies and their brands increases the complexity of such interaction (IBM, 2005). This is especially true in the digital environments where consumers are empowered (Edelman & Singer, 2015). Omnichannel asks companies to deal with a broad and integrated approach to customer experience, ensuring harmony and consistency across channels and across their touch-points (Rawson et al., 2013).

Many look at the customer journey as an operative and effective tool useful to deal with those barriers (Edelman & Singer, 2015; Rawson et al., 2013; Richardson, 2010). By mapping sequentially the steps that customers go through when interacting with a company, the latter can really take the customers' perspective. A deep understanding of the customers' world is a needed step toward the customer centricity (Norton & Pine, 2013). Indeed, a well-analyzed customer journey leads to excellent customer experience, thus indicating how to innovate and differentiate the offers (Bolton et al., 2014; Voss & Zomerdijk, 2007). Despite the theory, mapping the customer journey is not an easy task, as well as capturing useful knowledge to leverage on the journey and identify the customers' insights at the basis of a true customer centric approach (Ordenes et al., 2014). That is the topic addressed by our study, trying to answer the following research question: How can companies align customer journeys and their business strategy? Such a question is articulated in two research goals:

1) What kind of research design should companies run in an effort to better understand and map customer journey? And more specifically, what clusters of participants should they target to? What methods should they adopt to collect data?

2) How should companies leverage on the customer journey in order to design their strategy and their business model? How should they define their value proposition consistently with the customer journey?

Our study addresses the questions above by presenting a broad research study run to understand the drivers of excellence customer experience of individuals visiting bookshops via mapping their customer journey. We chose to analyze the bookshops experience for several reasons. First, bookshops struggle for success, with several competitors playing a strong role not only in the traditional physical environment, but mainly in other channels such as electronic commerce—where Amazon is the leading player there (Klaus, 2013)—offering similar product with enriched functional benefits. Second, their revenues are affected by the general trend related to reading that is increasingly suffering all across Europe (people declaring to have read at least one book in the previous 12 months has decreased from 71% in 2007 till 68% in 2013), even if with different scale according to the last national data recorded by Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2013). Third, their business model is expected to change rapidly according to the cross-fertilization among product categories, other channels, and so forth (Addis & Sala, 2007). In such a situation, delivering an excellent customer experience is the most promising differentiation strategy (Bolton et al., 2014). Indeed, the sociability, the flow, and the freedom experienced in conversation and communication make bookshops "third places", venues for local communities to enjoy (Laing & Roile, 2013).

Our research shows that several qualitative methods are needed all together to capture the multidimensionality of the customer experience. In this study, five qualitative methods have been adopted: in-depth interview, focus group, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, participant observation, and Collective Stereographic Photo Essay. Overall, more than 1 100 individuals participate in the study, contributing in generating new customers' insights about their experience in bookshops. Participants belong to several clusters of customers: people that never go in bookshops, potential customers, infrequent customers, loyal customers, individuals that visit bookshops to buy books or other product categories, or even just to attend specific events or their café. Further, we extend our analysis to the internal perspective by listening to bookshops' employees and their general managers. We broaden our analysis up to eleven bookshops in order to increase the external validity of our results (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Thus, we map the customer journey and identify the drivers of an excellent customer experience, so that bookshops can rely on this information to innovate their customer experience concept and strategy.

Our paper contributes to the customer experience management literature because it illustrates the process to map the customer journey and to improve the customer experience. Such a process is based on an extended research

design adopting a very holistic approach to enlarge two key dimensions, which are (a) the range of participants to the research, searching for the contribution of many different clusters of participants, such as the employees, the mangers, the actual customers, the prospect customers, the loyal and the infrequent customers; and (b) the range of research methods in order to capture the cognitive, the affective and the behavioral dimensions of customers' responses.

2. Mapping the Customer Journey

Nowadays marketing managers commonly agree that customer experience is the key strategy for the present and the future struggles in competitive environments, but this is a difficult strategy to execute (Bolton et al., 2014; Dirsehan & Yalçin, 2011; IBM, 2005; Nenonen, Rasila, Junnonen, & Kärnä, 2008; Tax, McCutcheon, & Wilkinson, 2013; Teixeira, Nunes, Nóbrega, Fisk, & Constantine, 2012). The biggest challenge in creating an excellent customer experience does not lie in creating single excellent touch-points, but rather in creating a link among them, so that they result from a general design and consistent framework (Rawson et al., 2013). Thus, consumers should perceive any single touch-point in any single channel as consistent and invariable execution of the same customer experience concept. The only way to achieve this goal is to map the customer journey: companies able to offer excellent journey to their customers obtain the highest financial returns (Norton & Pine, 2013; Rawson et al., 2013). Indeed, recently Edelman & Singer (2015) state that the competitive success depends on the extent at which companies "make the journey a compelling, customized, and open-ended experience" (p. 91).

A customer journey is a very simple but at the same time very powerful tool to put the customer experience into action. The customer journey is simply a process-oriented diagram presenting the key steps and activities in which customers are involved over time, in a timeline representing the interactions with a company, a brand, an environment and so forth (Nenonen et al., 2008; Richardson, 2010). By designing such timeline managers can gain the customers' perspective in order to first understand and then manage the key "moments of truth" (Grönroos, 1990).

Despite the widespread that this tool has gained recently, its origins might be traced back in time. Indeed, it can be regarded as the extension and updating of other operative tools, well-known in the marketing service literature, called the service blueprint (Shostack, 1992) and the service mapping (Kingman-Brundage, 1989). These two techniques were once widely applied, but they have been replaced with the more modern and comprehensive customer journey. Indeed, over time, especially thanks to the dissemination of the studies related to the customer experience, many have started to abandon the old techniques once common for service design preferring to apply the customer journey. The customer journey goes beyond the old techniques according to at least five dimensions, as reported in Table 1.

Table 1. The superiority of customer journey

Domain	Customer experiences
Temporal framework	The whole interaction process: pre-purchase interaction, the buying interaction, the consumption interaction, and the post-consumption interaction
Subject	Consumers' behaviors, affects, and cognitions
Kind of interactions analyzed	Direct and indirect interactions
Useful research methods	Research methods able to capture customers' behaviors and cognitions (participant observation and in-depth interview and focus group) and also affects and emotions (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, Collective Stereographic Photo Essay, and so on)

First, customer journey is related to the customer experience, which is defined as the whole process of direct and indirect interactions between customers and a company across several touch-points in several channels, that give rise to cognitive, affective, and behavioral customers' responses (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Lemke et al., 2011; Meyer & Schwager, 2007). As a consequence, customer journey applies to a much broader range of situations, potentially unlimited (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). Second, customer journey looks at the entire interactive process, which starts even prior the purchase when for instance consumers are exposed to an advertising, proceeds with the buying act, goes on with the real consumption, and ends only when the memory of the experience disappears (Tax et al., 2013; Verhoef et al., 2009). Until that specific moment, any key interaction should be mapped in the customer journey. Thus, customer journey expands its focus beyond the production/consumption moment, as instead previously done by the old techniques (Nenonen et al., 2008). Third,

according to the domain of the concept, customer journey aims at identifying the key interactions and their meanings in the customers' perspective, not restricting the analysis only to the behavioral customers' reactions. Richardson (2010) suggests that to map the customer journey, companies should identify the actions taken by customers at each stage of the customer experience, their motivations, including both the cognitive and the emotional sides, the uncertainties that could prevent the customers to move forward in the path, and, finally, the barriers and the obstacles that stand in at each stage. Thus, acts are only one of the several interesting dimensions of customers' responses. And the latter can refer to both direct and indirect interactions. This is the forth key driver of the superiority of customer journey, which looks also at the customers' reactions to word of mouth for instance, i.e., events that do not imply a real direct interaction with the company, extending the perspective to include also indirect interactions. Finally, in order to map the customer journey companies have to apply a broader range of research methods. Indeed, since it aims at giving voice not only to the behavioral and cognitive dimensions of consumer behavior, but also to the more emotional, irrational, and affective aspects of the consumer experiences, the research approach must be ethnographic and interpretative (Holbrook, 1995; Richardson, 2010).

Even if there might be many different ways to create the customer journey (Richardson, 2010), the above attributes of the customer journey indicate that only through a complex and articulated consumer research companies can gather the information to design and offer the best customer experience. Instead, even if understanding the key moments of the customer journey is the starting point to deliver an excellent customer experience, only a few companies make their customers participate in this process (Norton & Pine, 2013). However, even if they did they would just scratch only the surface of the topic, since many other aspects should be focused on:

1) The customer experience world: What does the specific customer experience mean to individual (potential or actual customers)?

2) The key interaction points: What are the main elements, which the customers interact with?

3) The path: What are the main paths that customers follow when experiencing the offer?

4) Customer behaviors at each interaction: How customers interact with the physical environment, staff people, and other people present there?

5) Customer benefits at each interaction: What are the desired, expected, unexpected, and perceived benefits in customers' perspective for each interaction?

6) Obstacles at each interaction: What are the obstacles that retrain customers from an excellent evaluation of the experience at each interaction?

7) Managerial implications: How can each interaction be improved in order to provide customers with an excellent experience?

To answer the above list of questions, many different perspectives and source of knowledge should be used. To illustrate how to run a research to map the customer journey and to identify how to design excellent customer experiences, the rest of the paper presents a study on bookshops.

3. Method

This research has been designed to get a clear idea of consumer-bookshop relationships with respect to customer experience, and customer journey. We run an extensive qualitative research design involving 11 bookshops in Italy, different for location (center vs. suburban), format (independent vs. chained bookshop), category products (only books vs. a broad range of products and events), level of specialization (specialized vs. general), and dimensions (very large vs. small bookshops).

Overall, 1 164 participants took part in the research, belonging to several clusters: Managers and booksellers of the bookshops; Customers of the bookshops of different familiarity (infrequent, frequent and loyal customers); People that were absolutely not familiar with the investigated bookshops, so that they took part in the research only because they have been invited on purpose; And, finally, people that have special interactions with the bookshops because they are children who attended a special event, or adults frequenting the bookshops' café, or special events such as readings or book presentations. Indeed, in this study it is desirable to investigate the full range of aspects designing the customer experience and the customer journey so that several clusters from the main market segments have been got involved. Thus, participants' profile differs in regard to their gender, age, interaction and familiarity with the bookshops.

All participants were contacted personally by the author and by a team of 68 researchers that have been trained

on purpose. Due to different methods and times of the research design, participants have been involved differently. In bookshops, the whole population of managers was invited to participate because they are the only ones with a very holistic and general perspective on their business strategy and models. Instead, with regard to booksellers, we had to limit their participation, because many of them were needed during the office hours. Thus, 43% of them took part in our research. They have been selected ensuring a wide range of expertise, seniority, responsibilities, and specializations. Loyal customers participating in the research have been selected thanks to the collaboration of booksellers and managers. Indeed, in each bookshop they know their loyal customers thanks to their personal knowledge or to their loyal programs through which they gather and record data about them. No matter whether such knowledge is formally embedded in a customer database or it is more informal and personal, booksellers and managers have identified a sample of loyal customers to invite in participating to our research according to the following criteria: (1) being loyal customers; (2) differing in terms of age, gender, profession. The collaboration of managers and booksellers has been precious also with regard to the sample selection of people attending events. Indeed, they provided the researchers with the information regarding the events, their organizational details and their participants, both for those targeted to children and to adults. Thus, the researchers have known prior to the events what kind of people would have participate. Further, specifically with regard to the children, their teachers have explicitly agreed on participating in the research a few days in advance of the event.

The procedure to select infrequent and frequent customers was still another one. Indeed, the researchers selected them in occasion of their visit to the bookshops. By observing people looking at the external windows or entering into the bookshops, researchers invited specific customers or observed them. During the interview—at the beginning in case of the in-depth interview, ZMET, and CSPE or at the end of the observation in case of the use of this technique—researchers gathered information about the strength of their relationship with that bookshop. A similar procedure has been adopted to select participants visiting the bar and café inside the bookshops, since they have been invited directly in the location. In all these cases, attention has been paid in making sure that participants differ with regard to gender, age, and company of the visit (being alone, with children, or with other adults). Finally, non-customer participants have been selected among the personal relationships of researchers. The latter were invited to identify a subsample of their friends and family members that can be defined as non customer of that specific bookshop, and a subsample of people that are non customers of any physical bookshop, and finally a group of people that go never to any physical or virtual bookshop. These three groups of people have been invited to participate in the research adopting different kinds of techniques. Again the whole sample of this final cluster of participants diverges for gender, age, and profession.

When needed, interviews have been arranged at the end of participants' visit or later on in other occasions, according to their convenience after confirming their availability to participate in the research project. This has been especially the case for loyal customers and for those whose experience have been investigated by experiential research tools using visual and sensory images to help better understand the meaning of the customer experience.

We applied five qualitative research methods to analyze customer experiences and map the customer journey, namely in-depth interview, focus group, participant observation, Collective Stereographic Photo Essay, and Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. Table 2 presents the details.

Table 2. Participants, techniques, and usefulness of the research project

Participants in the research	Number of participants	Research method	Notes	Information gathered on:
Bookshop managers	11	In-depth interview	100% of the population	• Key interactions with customers • Internal processes • Internal resources available in the management of the specific interaction
Booksellers	44	In-depth interview	43% of the entire population (103 booksellers in 11 bookshops)	• Key interactions with customers • The paths of the customer journey • Internal processes • Customers' behaviors when visiting the bookshops
Customers of the bookshop (infrequent, frequent, and loyal customers)	496	Participant observation	Average by bookshop: 45 individuals	• Observed key interactions with booksellers and bookshops • Observed behaviors of the customer journey in the bookshop of people familiar with it

132	In-depth interview	Average length: 48'	• Key interactions with booksellers and bookshops before, during and after the visit • The paths of the customer journey • Desired, expected, and perceived benefits • Motivations of the visit • Cognitive dimension of the customer experience • Behaviors as declared
			•
			•
30	Experiential techniques: CSPE or ZMET	Average number of images: 9	• Desired, expected, unexpected, and perceived benefits • Emotional dimension of the customer experience • Key interactions with booksellers and bookshops before, during and after the visit
Partial sum: 658			
Non-customers of the bookshops	228	Participant observation	People have been invited to visit the bookshop for the merely goal of the research	• Observed key interactions with booksellers and bookshops, with special focus on surprising elements • The paths of the customer journey • Observed behaviors during the customer journey in the bookshop of people unfamiliar with it
	92	In-depth interview	Average length: 54'	• Key interactions with booksellers and bookshops before, during and after the visit • Desired, expected, unexpected, and perceived benefits of unfamiliar customers • Motivations of the visit • Cognitive dimension of the customer experience • Behaviors as declared
	82	Experiential techniques: CSPE or ZMET	Average number of images: 8	• Desired, expected, unexpected, and perceived benefits of unfamiliar customers • Emotional dimension of the customer experience • Obstacles to the customer experience • Key interactions with booksellers and bookshops before, during and after the visit
	Partial sum: 402			
Specific additional clusters	10	ZMET	Children attending a reading event in a bookshop	• Desired, expected, unexpected, and perceived benefits of children • Emotional dimension of the customer experience of children • Key interactions with booksellers and bookshops before, during and after the visit
	8	Focus group	Adults at a café internal to a bookshop	• Key interactions with booksellers and bookshops before, during and after the experience • Desired, expected, and perceived benefits of the café • Motivations for going to the café • Cognitive dimension of the customer experience • Behaviors as declared at the café
	31	Focus group and participant observation	Adults attending 4 events (book presentations and readings) in bookshops	• Key interactions with booksellers and bookshops before, during and after the event • Desired, expected, and perceived benefits of events • Motivations for attending the events • Cognitive dimension of the customer experience • Behaviors as declared and as observed at the events
Total number of participants: 1 164			

Data collection took place during September-December 2014. After observing or discussed the characteristics and the profile of participants, each of them has been involved as requested by the technique. Managers and booksellers have been deeply interviewed at the beginning of the research in order to identify the interactions with customers, their internal procedures and the available resources to manage these moments of truth. Consumers and non consumers that have been interviewed individually or in focus group were encouraged to talk about their cultural consumption, their expectations towards bookshops and books, their previous

experiences,and assessment of their journey before, during, and after the visit as freely as possible, providing stories to support their statements. Overall seven screening questionnaires have been prepared to be used in focus group and in in-depth interview, differentiated to target specific clusters of participants: managers; booksellers; loyal customers; infrequent and frequent customers; non customers; people at the bar and café; participants attending events. All of them have been developed on the basis on the literature analysis and in conjunction with the managers of the bookshops.

Individuals that have been involved in the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) were asked to actively contribute in the research. Indeed, the ZMET is an interactive research technique, which asks participants to choose at least eight photographs or other visual images related to their emotions linked to their customer experience in the bookshop. Images can be taken from any source they like such as magazines, catalogs, or photo albums (Coulter & Zaltman, 1994; Zaltman, 2003). Participants have a few days to think about the task and the selected images, and also to think about the elicitated metaphors before the researcher interviews them. Special care was given to the research design involving children. Then, individuals whose experiences were investigated via the Collective Stereographic Photo Essay (CSPE) have been provided with a (simple, not stereographic) camera and have been asked to take some pictures about their experience and to briefly describe their meanings, as suggested in the research instructions (Holbrook & Kuwahara, 1998). Finally, participant observation was used to investigate the behavioral dimension of customer experience by investigating it in its natural context. Detailed field-notes on customer journey and experience in the analyzed bookshops were gathered (Grove & Fiske, 1992). In many cases, whenever the bookshop allowed, observed people were interviewed after their visit to elicit detailed narratives about their experience.

In any case in which oral material was gathered, it was recorded and further transcribed, and analyzed so that the customer journey could be revealed with the complex customer experience.

By running several research methods involving different key sources of information, our study depicts the customer experience in bookshops, identifying the drivers of innovation and success for each analyzed bookshop and for the global industry as well. The next section discusses the main findings.

4. Findings

Since the global complex approach adopted, our study offers many kinds of results, some of them referring to the whole industry and others to each bookshop. Managers of each bookshop have been provided with the findings related to their specific bookshop, addressing all the key points highlighted by Pine and Norton (2013): the customer experience world, the key interaction points; the general path; their customer behaviors, benefits, obstacles; and finally the managerial implications. However, for the sake of brevity the present section describes only the main findings that can be of general interest for the whole industry. They can be grouped in three subtitles: (1) the meanings of the customer experience in bookshops; (2) the drivers of excellence in consumers' opinion; (3) the role and competences of booksellers.

4.1 The Meanings of the Customer Experience In Bookshops

Bookshops are not perceived as usual or common stores selling books and other similar product categories:

"It is not a retailer, and it cannot even be compared to that." (Alessandra, 53 years old, infrequent customers of an independent bookshop)

As Giulia, a 6 years old child attending a book reading comments and commenting her images gathered via the ZMET (Figure 1):

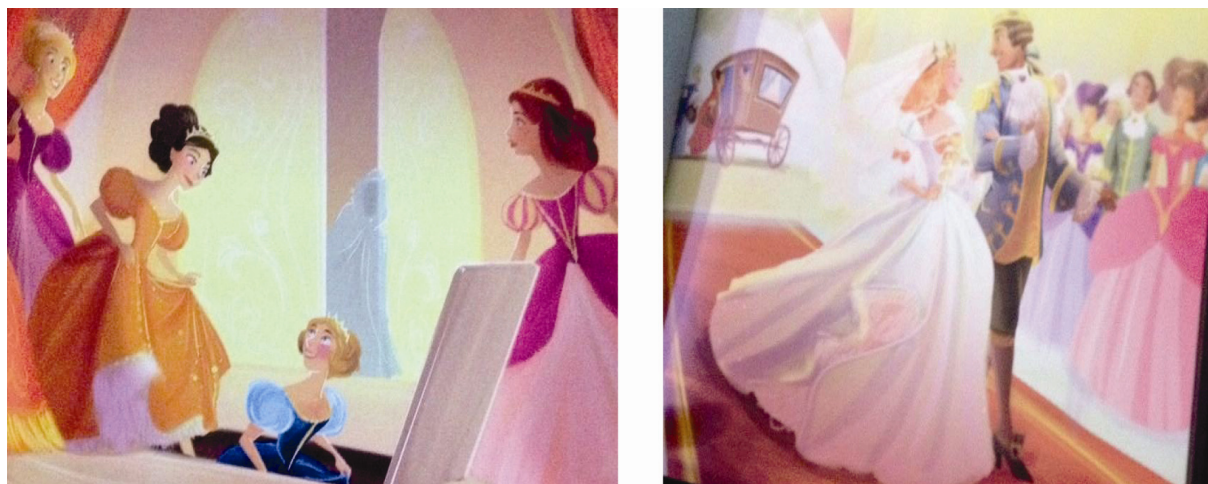*"A bookshop is like a journey with a happy ending."*

Figure 1. A happy ending journey

The first finding is quite specific to this industry. Consumers regard a visit to a bookshop as a true *"ritual"* to which they want to devote their time. It is not a functional activity in essence, but rather it is hedonistic by definition. Indeed, a visit there, regardless to its goal or length, is an *"important"* activity that generates *"enthusiasm"* and *"arousal"* in actual consumers. They perceive themselves to be consumers even if the visit does not produce a new purchase. As Ludovica (28 years old, loyal customer of an independent suburban bookshop) states:

"I really look forward to go to my bookshop. I can't wait"

Indeed, bookshops are not simply retailer; they are rather:

"Places in which taking a break" (Giovanni, 61 years old, loyal customer of an independent central bookshop).

Further, interestingly, such a relaxing and fun activity starts in consumers' minds much before entering the shop. Indeed, as Anna (32 years old, loyal customers of a central chained bookshop) says:

"I start thinking about my next visit to my close and friendly environment of the bookshop much in advance. I usually plan my visit at the beginning of the day. Actually, if I know I will be in the nearby at some point during the day, I try to organize that spare time. I know I will devote that time to me and my bookshop."

Similarly, Francesca (a 52 years old, loyal customer of a couple of central bookshops) points out that in her opinion:

"Books are the most sacred thing in life. And when I go to my bookshop and touch any single book that I would like to read, then I started imagining how it would feel to have that specific book in my place. My fantasy starts to run so that when I go home I already now where I will put my new book. I can't wait to put it on my shelf."

However, if books represent a key driver of the customer experience, the latter is much richer depending on several drivers in addiction to that. Indeed, consumers perceive a long list of benefits when they enter into the bookshops' world. Table 3 proposes a list of thirty benefits emerging in our consumers' analyses.

Table 3. Thirty benefits of customer experiences at bookshops

1	Autonomy
2	Calm
3	Community
4	Composure
5	Education
6	Engagement
7	Entertainment
8	Exclusivity
9	Familiarity
10	Friendliness
11	Fulfillment

12	Fun
13	Happiness
14	Improvement
15	Inclusivity
16	Independency
17	Involvement
18	Leisure
19	Love
20	Membership
21	Personal enhancement
22	Physical and social accessibility
23	Relax
24	Self-confidence
25	Serenity
26	Sharing
27	Socialization
28	Surprise
29	Warmth
30	Welcome

The emerging list of benefits includes both cognitive and emotional aspects of the customer experience, as well as more individual-oriented or more social-oriented benefits. Furthermore, our findings show that there is a moderator that emphasizes the relevance of these benefits in driving the customers' attitude, namely, the mindset behind the visit to the bookshop. Indeed, two main mindsets emerge when people visit bookshops, that are curiosity and planning, and they drive individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Our analysis identifies three main points of differences, which are summed up in Table 4.

Table 4. A comparison between the curious and the planner consumers' mindsets

Points of difference	The curious mindset	The planner mindset
Kind of visit	The consumer is attentive and open to any stimulus that emerges, thus people are willing to interact with anyone and anything that might offer the opportunity	The consumer is closed to any kind of stimulus, and people want to do by themselves without anyone's support. They are willing to be autonomous and independent
Length of visit	The visit is very long, with consumers spending much time in the bookshops	The visit is very brief and condensed
Main driver of interaction	Other individuals	Technology

Curious consumers visit the bookshop very carefully, by paying attention to any stimulus that emerges during their visit. Thus, they are very open to the customer experience. On the opposite side, planner consumers are so focused and act in a very precise and strict way so that they do not allow anyone and anything to meddle with their plan. Such a difference results also in contrasting length of the visit. While the curious consumer spends a longer time in the bookshop, even if s/he does not buy any book, the planner consumers look for a brief visit. For instance, according to our analyses, the participant observations run in a large chained bookshop find that while the curious consumers spend on average more than 20' visiting the shop and that time expands to 30' if they start reading, the planner consumers spend in the same environment less than 10'. Such a divergent behavior is confirmed also for the small independent bookshops. Indeed, a specialized central bookshop specialized in books about the movie industry is visited by curious consumers on average for more than 40' while by the planner consumers for less than 13'. Finally, consumers interact with different drivers according to their mindset. Thus, curiosity makes people interact with other people in the bookshop. They might be booksellers or other consumers, but in curious consumers' mind interaction is mainly social. On the contrary, people with a planning mindset prefer interact with technology in their attempt to be autonomous and independent.

4.2 The Drivers of Excellence in Bookshops

Our findings indicate three main drivers of excellence for the customer experience in bookshops. The excellent customer experience in bookshop is the one that (1) Is customized; (2) Makes consumers feel integrated; (3) Makes consumers participate actively.

1)   <u>The excellent customer experience is customized</u>. Consumers do not care whether the bookshops are independent or rather chained: They must offer a customized service. Customization is a key driver that usually is so relevant to consumers that they take that for granted. Consumers expect the bookshops to use the information they gathered about them to offer both a customized offer and a customized relationship. They simply expect the manager and the booksellers to leverage on the pieces of information that they should have stored across time from the start of the relationship. Thus, they expect bookshops to design specific offers and promotions suitable for their profile. Amazon *in primis* and all the ecommerce websites have taught consumers to expect such a service. But in addiction, since in bookshops the human factor is very relevant, they expect also the booksellers to adopt a customized approach to be of serve for them in a personalized way, starting from appropriate greetings. Surprisingly, such a treatment is not common in the analyzed bookshops. Both for the chained and the independent bookshops it is an organizational matter. Chained bookshops that could potentially rely on precise information registered in their customer loyalty dataset have trouble in organization processes so that the pieces of information on their customers are not accessible to the single bookshop but remain a resource only for the central managing headquarter. On the other hand, independent bookshops do not usually define organizational processes to customize relationships and offer. Everything is left to the single bookseller's commitment. As the manager of the bookshop with the highest revenues in the whole country states:

"In the bookshop we cannot rely on any kind of information. We simply have the face-to-face interaction. This is the only channel that we can use to help our customers."

2)   <u>The excellent customer experience makes consumers feel integrated</u>. Inclusivity and integration are the passwords for an excellent customer experience in this industry. Customers aim at feeling themselves part of bookshops. They want to be included into the experience, to be connected to the bookshop. Such a feeling depends on many touch-points that bookshops must design according to a specific experience concept. Some of them differ regarding to the format of the bookshop (chained vs. independent), and some other are shared (Table 5).

Table 5. Connection consumer-bookshop: A comparison between the chained and the independent bookshop

Touch-points	Chained bookshop	Independent bookshop	Do they differ?
Atmosphere	Pleasant	Pleasant	No
Shop windows	Welcoming and well-finished	Welcoming and well-finished	No
Events	Aimed at socialization	Aimed at socialization	No
Feeling	Freedom	Familiarity	Yes
Booksellers	Background actors of the experience	Leading actors of the experience	Yes
Perceived control of the environment	Very important	Irrelevant	Yes
Environmental stimuli	Many and rich	Not very important	Yes
Need to touch books	Very relevant	Not very relevant	Yes
Book selection	Broad and updated	Not very relevant	Yes

Regardless of its format, an excellent bookshop should offer a pleasant atmosphere. Obviously, the stimuli that are behind such a feeling differ but the result is similar in essence: Consumers aims at being at ease in a pleasant environment. Such a feature is not surprising since it is already well conceptualized by the stream of research about environmental psychology (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). However, there are two features that, although commonly taken into account, offer much space for improvement. Indeed, an excellent bookshop is also one that pays attention to the shop windows and to the events. Even if both chained and independent bookshops are aware of the relevance of these two features, consumers ask for something different. Consumers of both formats complain about cold, standard, unattractive shop windows, especially if they are not consistent with the positioning and the customer experience. Such a feature is very relevant in consumers' mind as stated by one of the ZMET images provided by Arianna, 45 years old, a loyal customer of a chained bookshop (Figure 2).

Figure 2. An image about the customer experience in a chained bookshop

Our findings show that commonly bookshops lose a relevant touch-point to create a compelling customer experience when they do not devote attention to their shop windows. On average, only 2% of the observed consumers stop by to look at the windows entering, a stable behaviors in both formats. Instead, attractive, warm, and well-finished shop windows consistent with the concept of the experience can attract the consumers' curiosity so that in front of them on average the observed consumers spend more than 2'. This is quite a huge amount of time and a big lost opportunity for bookshops, especially for the chained bookshops that appear to have more difficulties in managing this feature.

The last common feature between the two formats that still offers space for improvement refers to events. Organizing events in bookshops is a common offer in this industry, but the ideal event in consumers' mind is very different from the one usually designed. By running participant observation and focus groups, we found that the ideal event should be attractive, interesting, participative, well explained and promoted, and more than everything else it should let individuals socialize and express their opinions. Participants do not want simply to stay there and listen, but they aim at playing an active role so that events should make socialization easy. As Andrea, 24 years old infrequent customers of a chained bookshop states:

"I do not see the reason why I should be sitting here and listen to someone speaking. I mean, I know that the speakers are knowledgeable and I trust them since my bookshop invites them. I know it will be interesting. But I have something to say as well. I would love to have the opportunity to exchange my opinions and comments with other people."

But apart from these similarities, the drivers of excellence depend on the specific format. Thus, our analysis shows that emotions are a key element of both customer experience, but they differs: If consumers in a chained bookshop aim at feeling free, autonomous and independent, individuals in a independent bookshop aim at feeling at home. The former appreciate the total anonymity that a chained bookshop offers so that when they enter they:

"Do not look at anyone. I just want be myself, with my books. I do not want to interact with anyone else. I have a face-to-face relationship only with my books. I do not look for anything else, and for sure not for intrusive booksellers." (Alessandro, 54 years old infrequent customers of a chained bookshop commenting his image provided via ZMET and reported in Figure 3)

Figure 3. Relationships limited to books

Chiara, a 17 years old non-customer specifically in-depth interviewed, adds:

"I do not want people around continuously asking me "may I help you?" I do not want to talk to anyone. If I wanted, I would have gone to ask them. I do not see why someone else, that I do not know at all, should know my tastes. They are very personal and I do not want to share them with unknown people. It is my business."

On the opposite, customers of independent bookshops want to find a familiar environment. Toward that goal, they strongly rely on the booksellers and their professional and relational competences. The resulting memories of the customer experience strongly depend on this driver. Related to this variable, also the perceived environmental control emerges as being different in the two formats. Individuals going to a chained bookshop greatly appreciate when they comprehend and dominate the environment in which they are. Thus, any tool designed and offered to make them perceive more control over the environment—such as signs, colors, visual merchandising, the standardization of the space arrangement, and so on—are highly appreciated because they provide them with a feeling of safety and self-confidence, as emerged in the means-end chains obtained by the interviews. The ZMET analysis supports this finding, consistent with the dominance dimension of the PAD model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Non-consumers assessing their first visit to a chained bookshop highlight the feeling of getting lost as in a labyrinth. This is an important obstacle to acquire new customers. Thus, if these tools are not put into actions or are not properly perceived by the target, visiting a chained bookshop becomes a nightmare. Individuals can easily feel disoriented, mainly because of three reasons: (1) A too broad and confusing product selection and display; (2) Booksellers are not easily recognizable and act and interact in standardized ways; (3) The omnichannel, which makes difficult for customers understand the differences between product selection in the physical bookshops and the selection available via the digital channels. Figure 4 presents some of the metaphors elicitated by non-consumers and related to confusion.

The lack of dominance in the environment can take place also at independent bookshops, representing a key general obstacle. Participant observation run in a small specialized and central independent bookshop reveals that 55% of customers do not explore the whole space, limiting their visit to the first two out of three zones of the bookshop. When interviewed, these people admitted that they were not aware that the bookshop was larger than that, and they thought that it was already all. In terms of revenues, such a false perception represents a loss of revenues, since almost 27% of the revenues of that specific bookshop are related to books physically located in the last zone.

To get the overall impression of autonomy and pleasure, chained bookshops should be designed proposing several rich environmental stimuli so that they can generate high levels of arousal in their customers. The latter can be increased only by stimulating consumers to touch the books and physically interact with them. Indeed, in the chained bookshop, 62% of the observed customers touch books, and in some stores such a level is up to 93%. Similarly, the selection of books should be broad and updated, proposing many and changing offers, latest products, and promotions. As Mario, 56 non-customer states in his interview run via ZMET commenting the image of Google that he evoked to talk about his experience:

"To me this huge bookshop is a kind of searching engine for books. Think about a genre, a title. Well, you will find it here. For sure."

Figure 4. Examples of images related to the confusion in chained bookshops

On the same issue, Enrico, a 29 years old infrequent customer of a small, specialized independent bookshop has a totally different opinion saying:

"This bookstore is like a supermarket for books. It is very confusing. And also books are displayed with no order. Its design is very similar to any large grocery store. There is no difference whether they sell detergents or books. There is space for trust there. This is why I do not go there."

Indeed, these elements are not very important for independent bookshops, which should pay much more attention in customizing their customer relationships.

3)   The excellent customer experience makes consumers participate actively. The last driver for a compelling and memorable customer experience is socialization. The latter is expected both off- and on-line. Indeed, bookshops are perceived as the platform for social relationships with individuals with similar profiles. They are expected to organize not only book presentations, but also cocktails, and dinner with writers. These events are by definition small, intimate and involving. But in this situation not only the guest speaker is relevant, but also the profile of other people attending the events. As Carmela, a 33 years old loyal customer of a chained bookshop states:

"Finding someone with whom you share the perspective of life outside is so difficult, while I am sure that I share some values with people coming here. I would love to have the occasion to know people here. I am sure that strong link could be created".

In Carmela's words, bookshops should have also a role in creating social links. With their so well-defined image of books, people that appreciate their value should share relevant personality traits. Sharing of values transforms bookshops in a sort of "piazza" where similar people get together. In the digital world, socialization is quite similar to customization. Customers entering in an online relationship with a bookshop expect the latter to customize the newsletter and emails and also to use the social networks in a proper way, using the platform to reinforce the personal relationships.

4.3 The Role and Competences of Booksellers

Finally, our study highlights the strong role played by booksellers. No matter whether they work in a chained or

in an independent bookshop they are always very well respected and recognized as authoritative players. Guido, a 48 years old infrequent customer of a chained bookshop, uses the image of a woman with thousands arms (Figure 5) to express the fact that:

"Booksellers change frequently and they are trained to do several tasks. In the woman with many arms I see their role. They are very interchangeable."

Figure 5. The bookseller

Interestingly, in consumers' perspective the ideal booksellers should play a much broader and deeper role than expected. Our analysis indicates that they should be:

1)   Competent and professional: They should know the book industry, the old and new titles, the writers, even the most recent, updated with the last news and trends regarding the overall society. They must be prepared, and trained.

2)   Engaging: They should have a strong passion for books, and they should be able to transmit such a passion so that customers get involved and fascinated by their stories. They should have an open attitude in order to make consumers feel at home in their company, at ease, and with someone trustful.

3)   Psychologist: They should listen to the individuals, even when the latter do not know exactly what to ask. They should be able to understand consumers' needs even if they are latent. Further, they should be wise.

4)   Prepared members of a structured organization: They have to know the exact location of all the titles in the bookshop by heart without asking for the help of computers, and at the same time they should know the processes, the resources and the organizational aspects of the whole bookshop;

5)   Gentle: They should be friendly, cordial, informal but at the same time very respectful, and not intrusive. They should be serious, quite, tidy, and professional but also creative, smiling and cheerful, with a proper casual clothing.

6)   Supportive: They must be of help and providing useful, precise and in-depth advices. They should make consumers grow up internally, and at the same time they should be fast and easily recognizable.

Those six competences explain the difference between a bookseller and a sales assistant:

"Bookshops are not sales assistants. They are counselors and advisors. No. Actually they are even more. They are mentors. Yes, this is what they are." (Francesca, 49 years old loyal customer of an independent bookshop)

Consistently, the manager of a large central chained bookshop estimate that she spend 30% of her working time chatting with their loyal customers who visit the bookshops even for a quick greeting.

5. Conclusions

Companies have a hard time in identifying how to innovate their service. Customer experience is commonly presented as the differentiation strategy able to obtain the competitive and market success (Bolton et al., 2014).

But such a strategy cannot be easily designed and implemented. Toward that end, a powerful tool is the customer journey, but mapping it is not a simple task. The contribution of this study is twofold: (1) It better designs the process that managers should follow in order to map customer journey; (2) It offers many customer insights to derive useful managerial implications for the bookshops industry.

With regard to the first contribution, this study presents the process to map the customer journey and deeply understand the customer experience. The traditional consumer research techniques on which managers strongly rely offer only a very superficial approach to customer experience, as already stated by previous studies (Lai & Chang, 2013; Voss & Zomerdijk, 2007). Specifically, our study reveals two main weaknesses: (a) they adopt a rational perspective on consumer behavior, that by definition, as more than 30 years of studies show, are much more emotional; (b) they involve only individuals who experience the brand naturally, thus limiting their analysis only to actual customers. Via running five different techniques on several different clusters both internal and external to the bookshops we could fully understand the broad framework and the details of specific aspects of customer experience, not limiting the analysis to the cognitive consumers' responses but including also the behavioral and the emotional reactions. Specifically, barriers and obstacle that limit the market for any brand can be identified only via a comprehensive analysis of people that do not usually live that experience. By analyzing several clusters of people—including the non customers—and by adopting a broad range of techniques, managers can identify the key interactions and map the customer journeys.

With regard to the second contribution, many managerial implications can be derived for attentive bookshops. Despite the fact that our research is merely qualitative leading to hypotheses that further quantitative analyses should test rigorously, our results suggest that bookshops should start revising their offers, in many cases. First, the customer experience world offers a list of desired benefits that is long and sometimes surprising for a product category that is bought in shops and stores. Bookshops are much more than retailers aiming at distributing books. They offer an entire social platform that especially curious individuals are willing to explore. These benefits represent potentially relevant drivers for bookshops positioning, defining the framework for their customer experience concept. Indeed, drivers completely change since consumers of chained bookshops appear to favor autonomy while consumers of independent bookshops look for a connection with booksellers. This finding is consistent with the taxonomy of customer shopping experience—namely, bonding, negligence, stalking, and autonomy—developed by Alhouti, Gillespie, Chang, & Davis (2015) in general. It also proposes that the choice of the experience providers indicate the kind of relationship the customers are willing to have with salespersons, and maybe the level of social anxiety in commercial settings (Delacroix & Guillard, 2016). Second, our findings identify the drivers for excellence in this industry. Indeed, customers react favorably to bookshops that offer customized, integrated, and social customer experiences. These three drivers of customer experience rely on the interactions that bookshops need to accumulate incrementally, as proposed by the principle "substituting information for interaction" (Glushko & Nomorosa, 2013). These three drivers detail the co-creation of values, which is a key element in customer experience (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Consistently with the concept of rituals, bookshops represent more a social platform than a place located to supply individuals with books. Accordingly, people working there fulfill a complex role. They are not expected only to help consumers in identifying and finding the desired book, but rather they support consumers in finding their way in life. Thus, bookshops are expected to replace their being store with being platform, while booksellers will soon transform themselves from sale assistants into tutors for life. Finally, there is only one open question still unanswered: Will they be ready?

Acknowledgments

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