Interactions and touchpoints along the hotel guest journey: an approach to experience management

Interacciones y puntos de contacto a lo largo del viaje del huésped del hotel: una aproximación a la gestión de experiencias

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Abstract

To create a memorable experience for its customers, the hotel firm must have complete control over the process, down to the smallest detail. This research aims to deepen the experience generation process, from a business perspective, by examining experiential encounters and touchpoints in detail. To identify the objectives to be achieved, both directly and indirectly, in each stage of the experiential process, it was necessary to identify the experiential encounters and touchpoints that generate value for the guest. Additionally, it was important to identify the key elements of a hotel customer's experience, the providers involved, and the managerial areas related to guest experience generation.

After reviewing a large amount of literature, we conducted focus groups with hotel staff who are involved in the guest's experiential journey. We identified the main service encounters that occurred during this journey, which allowed us to identify the principal touchpoints, including products, interactions, messages, and settings. By managing brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, or social/external touchpoints, positive guest experiences can be generated.

Hotels must understand the process of generating guest experiences to improve them.

Resumen

Para crear una experiencia memorable para sus clientes, la empresa hotelera debe tener un control total del proceso, hasta el más mínimo detalle. Esta investigación pretende profundizar en el proceso de generación de experiencias, desde una perspectiva empresarial, examinando en detalle los encuentros experienciales y los puntos de contacto. Para identificar los objetivos que deben alcanzarse, tanto directa como indirectamente, en cada etapa del proceso experiencial, fue necesario identificar los encuentros experienciales y los puntos de contacto que generan valor para el huésped. Además, era importante identificar los elementos clave de la experiencia de un cliente de hotel, los proveedores implicados y las áreas de gestión relacionadas con la generación de experiencias para el huésped.

Tras una profunda revisión de literatura, llevamos a cabo grupos de discusión con personal hotelero vinculado a la experiencia del huésped. Identificamos los principales encuentros de servicio que se producen durante este viaje, lo que permitió identificar los principales puntos de contacto, incluidos los productos, interacciones, mensajes y entornos. Mediante la gestión de los puntos de contacto propios de la marca, de los socios, de los clientes

This research provides a guideline that any hotel can use to manage the guest experience.

Keywords: experiential process; experiential encounters; touchpoints; guest experience generation.

o de las redes sociales/externas, se pueden generar experiencias positivas.

Los hoteles deben comprender el proceso de generación de experiencias de los huéspedes para mejorarlas. Esta investigación ofrece una guía que cualquier hotel puede utilizar para gestionar la experiencia del huésped.

Palabras clave: proceso experiencial; encuentros experienciales; puntos de encuentro; generación de la experiencia del huésped.

1. INTRODUCTION

The generation of the hotel guest experience extends throughout the three phases of the customer journey: a prospective phase (pre-purchase, booking, purchase, post-purchase, pre-experience ex-situ), an Active Phase (in-situ pre-experience, experience, in-situ post-experience), and a Reflective Phase (ex-situ post-experience) (Yachin, 2018).

Firm-customer encounters along the customer journey are the point of value creation and knowledge sourcing (Akaka et al., 2015). And the value creation along the journey should be different depending on the moment: anticipating (expectations and imagination) in the prospective phase, realizing (participation) in the active phase, and recollecting (satisfaction, nostalgia, reinterpretation, and self-image) in the reflective phase (Yachin, 2018).

The points through which a customer comes into contact with the organization, across multiple channels and at various points in time, are called touchpoints (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). The sequence of customer behaviors (inspiration, need recognition, information, reservation, use/servuction, evaluation of performance, and share) and the given several service encounters are the locus in which through the touchpoints, the experience is generated.

To be competitive in a service-based industry, a company must look for ways to complement existing service offerings with new experience-staging techniques to maximize the effect of each service encounter. Authors such as Dewar, Mackay, Smith, Pullin and Tocher focus on the concept of service design, relating it directly throughout the customer journey (Dewar et al., 2010). As Mossberg advanced, consumer experience cannot be granted by the organization, firms can only construct the setting in which willing consumers can partake in an experience (Mossberg, 2007)**.** Some other researchers reinforce this point of view, which posits that firms may establish emotional connections with their clients by creating impressive environments, resulting in satisfied and loyal customers (Bitner, 1992): (Holbrook & Hirschmar, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Pullman & Gross Michael A, 2004).

A recent research evidenced a lack of insight into touchpoints beyond firm control, pointing out that most of the reviewed research shows a narrow scope of stimuli and touchpoints (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). This approach gives rise to studying diverse offering-related stimuli through multiple levels of aggregation.

1.1. The experience generation in hotels, from Service Encounters to Experience Encounters

Along the Guest Experiential journey, there are technological, organizational, and temporal interdependencies between the service encounters.

Customer service encounters may be with employees, other customers, technology, intermediaries, and the environment (physical elements and ambient factors also influence the generation of experience). Service encounters can also be classified depending on the purchase phase in the customer journey: pre, during or post (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

- Pre-Core Service Encounters are interactions with the brand, category, and environment before a purchase transaction. These service encounters are important to familiarize the customer with the firm´s service offering, to initially engage with the customer to bring them into the service, to customize the service, and to generate the expectations.
- Core Service Encounters are interactions with the brand and environment during the purchase transaction (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), and in services also the usage-servuction (Langeard & Eiglier, 1987).
- Post Core Service Encounters are interactions with the brand and its environment following the purchase. These service encounters are important to maintain a relationship with the customer over time.

The possibility to generate knowledge about experiential purposes is conditioned by the firm´s ability to bestow encounters with an experience-like quality and promote the customers´ transformation into participants.

Unlike other businesses, tourism firms should address customers´ latent desires and experiential purposes more than understanding expectations and functional needs. This fact makes the difference between service encounters and experiential encounters, making the latter personalized and dynamic interactions in which front-line employees should apply experiential intelligence and flexibility to address customers` latent desires and purposes (Akaka et al., 2015). Experiential encounters integrated into the guest experiences create added experiential value for them at the same time that permit to increase the creation of knowledge about guests (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015).

As Yachin (2018) defined, to transform a customer into a participant of an experiential encounter, the key factors are to invite and involve (give room to customers in discussions, preparations, and decision-making), to adopt an experiential discourse (focus on imagination, fulfillment, past experiences, and dreams), and to include supporting moments designed to socialize.

1.2. Touchpoints

Touchpoint concept was linked to services by Shostack in 1984, as tangible evidence of the so-called service plan. Touchpoints were defined as those key elements that the consumer uses to verify the effectiveness of their service and through which an exceptional service could be generated (Shostack, 1984).

Touchpoints, also known as moments of contact between the customer and the organization (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010), contact points (Stauss and Weinlich, 1997), service events (Lillrank, 2009), or moments of truth (Carlzon, 1989), deliver what Voss, Roth, and Chase (2008) identify as experience-centric services, services in which firms craft the customer experience proactively to create distinctive product and service offerings (Voss et al., 2008).

A guest experiences a service process consisting of multiple touchpoints along the customer journey, which encompasses all phases of the experience. For a firm, touchpoints influence customers' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and offer a framework for understanding what customer experience actually means and what needs to be improved (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Touchpoints occur whenever a customer comes into contact with the organization, across multiple channels and at various points in time (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010).

The effect of an individual touchpoint may depend on when it occurs in the overall customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

A guest journey includes not only direct touchpoints between customers and a service provider, but also indirect ones, such as review websites and social media platforms. In the service sector, that is, in hospitality, the majority of indirect touchpoints are the starting point of a guest journey, by attracting the attention of guests to a certain service/product (Stickdorn & Zehrer, 2009; Stickdorn et al., 2011).

Along the journey, customers are exposed to multiple touchpoints, each of which has direct and indirect effects on purchase and other customer behaviors. It is crucial for a company to identify critical touchpoints (called moments of truth) throughout the customer journey that would have the most significant impact on key customer outcomes (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

According to Richardson and Li (2010), there are four categories of touchpoints: products, interactions, messages, and settings.

- Products as touchpoints, are the hardware, software and services themselves the same as vans or the website as central to every aspect of business, from acquiring to servicing customers can be classified as product touchpoint. Depending on the use of the touchpoint for a specific company, they may be classified differently, for example, for companies where the website is a straightforward marketing tool, it may be better to classify the Web in Messages.
- Interactions as touchpoints are the bidirectional interactions that can be in person (such as in a store), on the phone, or virtual (websites, blogs, social networking and user forums, etc.).
- Messages as touchpoints are these one-way communications that include the brand, collateral, manuals, advertising, packaging, and the like.
- Settings as touchpoints are anywhere the product is seen or used: a retail store, a friend's house, TV product placement, events or shows.

Another differentiation of touchpoints is provided by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), who classify touchpoints by their owner as brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external.

- Brand-owned touchpoints are customer interactions during the experience that are designed, managed, and under the control of the company. They include brand-owned media (e.g., advertising, websites, loyalty programs) and brand-controlled elements of the marketing mix (e.g., product attributes, packaging, service, price, convenience, sales force).
- Partner-owned touchpoints are customer interactions during the experience that are jointly designed, managed, or controlled by the company and one or more of its partners. This type of touchpoint can include marketing agencies, multichannel distribution partners, multivendor loyalty program partners, and communication channel partners.
- Customer-owned touchpoints are customer actions that are part of the overall customer experience but that the firm, its partners, or others do not influence or control. Customer-owned touchpoints are most critical and prevalent in the post-purchase phase when individual consumption and usage take center stage.
- Social/external touchpoints recognize the important roles of others in the customer experience.

Throughout the experience, customers are surrounded by external touchpoints (e.g., other customers, peer influences, independent information sources, environments) that can influence the process. During the purchase process or for products and services that are consumed immediately after purchase (such as theaters, concerts, restaurants,

sporting events, and mobile apps), other customers may influence a customer's decision-making through extra role behavior or simply through proximity. Studies by Baxendale, Macdonald and Wilson (2015) and Risselada, Verhoef and Bijmolt (2014) have shown that these effects can be significant and comparable to or even larger than advertising effects (Baxendale et al., 2015).

In many service settings, service delivery to a customer occurs in the presence of other customers, leading to frequent interactions between them (Grove & Fisk, 1997 ; Wu, 2007). These interactions can significantly impact the outcomes and processes of service delivery, resulting in either positive or unpleasant experiences for customers. Grove and Fisk (1997) found that customer-to-customer interactions can have a positive or negative impact on customer satisfaction and quality perception. Additionally, Lin and Liang (2011) suggest that the social environment can also influence the customer experience.

Third-party information sources, such as review sites (e.g., TripAdvisor) and social media, can also exert influence on customers. Sometimes sources are independent; while others are more closely aligned with the brand or firm (e.g., Manchanda, Packard and Pattabhiramaiah, 2015) or considered partner touchpoints. Social media has gained significant attention within the marketing literature. The role of reviews in the purchase process has also been extensively documented (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2003).

Other researches have differentiated between firm-initiated and customer-initiated touchpoints (Anderl et al., 2015; de Haan et al., 2016). They suggest that brand-owned and partner-owned touchpoints are more likely to be firm-initiated, while customer-owned and social/external touchpoints are more likely to be customer-initiated.

De Keyser, Verleye, Lemon, Keiningham, and Klaus (2020) pointed that while the literature predominantly focuses on firm-controlled touchpoints, there is a growing recognition of non-firm-controlled touchpoints, particularly the role of others (De Keyser et al., 2020a).

As a strategic option primarily aimed at improving dissatisfying touchpoints, some firms outsource these touchpoints to third parties. Either through branded outsourcing (where the firm uses a third-party brand) or unbranded outsourcing (without being explicitly visible to the consumer) (Kranzbühler et al., 2019).

These touchpoints classifications provide firms with an organizing framework for understanding potential leverage points in the customer experience. For instance, firms can identify the touchpoints in the journey that they own or can influence, and be cognizant of those touchpoints that they have no or minimal influence over (customer-owned, social/ external) (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Diverse Touchpoints classifications				
(Richardson & Li, 2010).	Lemon and Verhoef (2016)	De Haan, Wiesel, and Pauwels (2016)	Kranzbühler et al., (2019)	De Keyser, et al., (2020)
• Products • Interactions • Messages • Social/external	• Brand-owned • Partner-owned • Customer-owned • Social/external	• firm-initiated • customer-initiated	• branded outsourcing • Unbranded outsourcing	• firm-controlled • non-firm-controlled

Figure 1. Diverse Touchpoints Classifications. Source: Self elaboration.

1.3. The generation of the experience through the touchpoints and stimuli

Service companies often conceptualize service delivery as customer journeys consisting of interconnected touchpoints (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). A customer journey examines the customer's perspective, including their actions, goals, questions, and barriers over time (Richardson & Li, 2010). To achieve this, it is recommended to walk in the customer's shoes (Holmlid & Evenson, 2008).

Customer journey maps are visual representations of events or touchpoints depicted chronologically, often accompanied by emotional indicators. They are used as a visualization technique within service design (Blomkvist & Segelström, 2014).

Touchpoints are usually presented horizontally on customer journey maps, following a process timeline that is divided into three periods: pre-service, service, and post-service (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). The timeline is just the starting point, it is necessary to understand what is happening in each stage and in a useful framework to look at actions, motivations, questions, and barriers.

The organization supports the customer journey by orchestrating touchpoints, which are any points of interaction between the customer and the brand. The key to creating a superior customer experience is to integrate these touchpoints seamlessly. There are two ways to approach this: longitudinally throughout the customer journey or by ensuring that each touchpoint type supports the others for each stage of the journey (Richardson & Li, 2010).

Nowadays, customer journeys are often described as multitouch and multichannel, meaning that there are multiple touchpoints at each stage of the journey, and new types of stimuli are emerging every day. This suggests that firms need to understand a broad range of touchpoints both within and outside of their control, in both offline and online settings (Bolton et al., 2018; Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Customers actively construct their own consumption experiences through personalized interaction, co-creating unique value for themselves (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003).

Experiences are created/lived by customers based on their interpretation of encounters and interactions designed by a service provider (Hume et al., 2006). Organizations cannot fully control these experiences. An experience is generated within an individual, and the outcome depends on how they react to the staged event in a specific mood and state of mind (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Hanefors & Mossberg, 2003). Therefore, for a tourism service provider to be successful, it is essential to understand how companies can create circumstances that enhance customers' experiences (Mossberg, 2007).

The various dimensions of a customer's experience with a firm can be categorized as cognitive/mental, emotional/affective, sensorial/physical, social/relational and behavioral/pragmatic (Brakus et al., 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

1.4. Customer experience management

Customer experience management (CEM) captures and distributes customer feedback at points of interaction or touchpoints with a firm. This feedback can be obtained through surveys, targeted studies, observational studies, or voice of customer research. The purpose of CEM is to enable business or functional leaders to create fulfillable expectations and improve customer experiences with products and services (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

Commonalities in the service process promote unambiguity in service characterization and bring rigor and formalism to customer journeys (Halvorsrud et al., 2016). Service organizations should strategically map out every touchpoint, evaluate their service performances at each touchpoint, and identify how they can improve by adding or redesigning touchpoints (Stickdorn et al., 2011). The design principles include the following:

1. Design from the customer's perspective, the journey and its associated touchpoints.
2. Conduct sensory design.
3. Ensure front-line employees engage with customers.
4. Pay attention to the dramatic structure of events.
5. Manage the presence of fellow customers.
6. Closely couple backstage employees and frontstage experiences.

The integration of touchpoints requires collaboration among multiple departments within a company, as well as external partners, to enhance the customer experience (Richardson & Li, 2010).

As journeys become more intricate and personalized, it is essential to avoid silos in the literature that concentrate on a limited number of stimuli and touchpoints, as they fail to capture the true customer experience. Literature fields that consider customers' holistic

experiences in their lifeworld take a broader view, but lack precision and insight into how experiences related to particular offerings emerge (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

The impact of one point of contact on subsequent experiences has been noted (Stauss & Weinlich, 1997). It is crucial to comprehend the factors that influence customer experiences to create an environment that enables customers to connect and create their own experiences (Diller et al., 2006).

2.   RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Due to its high impact, there has been a growing interest in studying the process of experience generation from a business perspective, which is precisely the approach of this research. Our main goal is to delve into the experience generation process in detail focusing on experiential encounters and touchpoints. The objective of this study is to identify the goals that hotels aim to achieve, both directly and indirectly, during each stage of the experiential process. To accomplish this, it is crucial to identify the experiential encounters and touchpoints through which value is generated for the guest, the key elements of a hotel customer´s experience, the suppliers involved, and the management areas related to the guest experience generation.

Experience as a response to consumption processes, as focused on in the research tradition, can also be analyzed deeply in terms of journey composition, as is done from a managerial point of view, focusing on the meanings that emerge at specific touchpoints (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

This research aims to identify the touchpoint level meanings and key factors for generating experiences through the knowledge of managers involved in the experience management.

The goal is to identify the guest experience service encounters along the guest experiential journey and all touchpoints through which the experience is generated during each service encounter. The analysis of deep touchpoints will facilitate their classification and control, as well as the identification of the key factors to manage them from the hotel's perspective.

3.   METHODOLOGY

To achieve the main objective of the research, the qualitative technique of the focus group has been identified as optimal. Focus groups are a useful method for exploring people's thoughts, ideas, attitudes, and experiences in relation to a particular topic. They combine interviewing, participant observation, and group interaction (Petrus, 2017).

To obtain knowledge from hotel experts on touchpoints and management keys that generate positive experiences, it is important to encourage interaction among experts in focus groups. This will stimulate discussion and encourage participants to justify their contributions and draw conclusions based on initial perceptions.

In an area that has not been extensively researched, the focus group technique serves a triple purpose: to contrast the existing level of knowledge about the discipline; to gather information that would serve to confront what has already been reported in the literature; and to identify potential emerging areas for future research (García, 2005).

Focus groups can vary in size from three participants (Lane et al., 2001) to twelve (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Stewart et al., 2014). However, small groups are suitable when the aim is to obtain in-depth insights or if the participants have a lot of experience in the area (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Therefore, for this research, small groups consisting of experts in the field have been chosen.

To gain insight into the perspectives of different groups, it is necessary to conduct multiple focus groups on the same topic (Grudens-Schuck et al., 2004). In the context of the hotel guest experience journey, this includes pre-core service encounters managed by marketing and commercial teams, core service encounters managed by guest experience managers, and post-core service encounters managed by social media managers. Therefore, two different series of focus groups were planned.

- The first was attended by guest experience managers to identify the key touchpoints in the core experience encounters and to draw out the key aspects to be managed in order to bring out the guest experience.

- The second workshop was attended by marketing, commercial and social media managers to identify the key touchpoints in the pre- and post-core service encounters and to draw out the key aspects to manage to bring out the guest experience.

There are no established rules for determining the optimal number of groups. This decision should be based on the research objectives (Stewart et al., 2014). The saturation point of the research (Morgan, 1996; Krueger & Casey, 2014) should determine when no more focus groups are necessary to achieve the desired insights.

In this study, the first focus group consisted of Guest Experience Managers from 4-5 stars hotels in Barcelona. Following literature suggestions that groups should be oversampled by two to four participants to ensure an appropriate number of participants, the group was over-recruited by seven individuals. Unfortunately, four of the invited individuals were unable to participate due to last-minute issues.

Three guest experience managers share their perspectives on the guest experience throughout the touchpoints in a 1 hour and 15 minutes session.

The researcher acted as the moderator, as they possess the necessary background knowledge and familiarity with the study's goals and question route (Petrus, 2017).

During the focus group, the moderator not only listened to the content of the discussions, but also paid attention to emotions, ironies, contradictions, and tensions. The focus group method enables researchers to gain insight into the meaning behind the facts, rather than just the facts themselves (as in survey methods). This is a major advantage of the focus group method.

The moderator's role is to facilitate group processes and ensure that the discussion covers the topics of interest. This role is fulfilled by a non-participant (Fern, 2001; Sim & Snell, 1996). To ensure the success of the focus group, the moderator's role is to create a purposeful introduction that sets the ground rules and establishes a permissive environment to encourage participants to share their points of view (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; Gelling, 2015), maintain the focus of the discussion without directing or constraining it (Sim and Snell, 1996 ; Gelling, 2015), encourage those who are less forthcoming (Hurworth, 1996; Sim and Snell, 1996), establish rapport while remaining non-judgmental (Parsons & Greenwood, 2000); Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001; Gelling, 2015), use pauses and probes effectively (Carey & Smith, 1994; Hurworth, 1996; Parsons & Greenwood, 2000), clarify and paraphrase what has been said (Hollis et al., 2002) and remain focused on key questions.

A preliminary study was conducted to identify touchpoints for questioning or validation during the focus group. This study also served as a starting point for identifying additional touchpoints to add value. Following the guidelines outlined in (Petrus, 2017), a question route was prepared to ensure a natural progression towards key discussion points.

A second focus group was necessary, and ten experts were invited, of which only five finally participated. They collectively possessed over 70 years of experience in serving hotel guests. The aspects identified in the initial focus were confirmed and some were further explored, while other unrelated aspects did not arise. It appears that further focus groups with guest experience managers are not necessary to narrow the focus of this research.

To further enhance the guest experience, we propose conducting focus groups (as needed) with marketing, commercial, and social media managers to reinforce pre- and post-stay knowledge. This will provide an additional perspective on how to improve the guest experience. During the third focus group, seven participants were initially summoned, but only four experts with over 90 years of combined experience in hotel

marketing and commercialization ultimately participated. The group confirmed and expanded upon some of the aspects identified in the previous focus group but did not uncover any significantly different aspects.

After conducting three focus groups it was determined that no new insights were being gained, indicating that the saturation point had been reached (Morgan, 1996; Krueger and Casey, 2014). Therefore, additional groups were deemed unnecessary to gain further insights on this topic.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This research focuses on encounters and touchpoints. However, to understand the experience generation, it is important not to forget that the touchpoints, classified by control, nature, and stage as products, interactions, messages, and settings, as summarized in *figure 2,* compose the three overarching experience building blocks next to the context (individual, social, market and environmental) and the qualities (participation, dimensionality, time flow, valence and ordinariness) (De Keyser et al., 2020b).

Building block	Element	Sub-elements	
TOUCHPOINTS - Products - Interactions - Messages - Settings	Control	Firm-controlled	
		Non-firm-controlled	Partner /outsourcing
			Customer
			Social/external
	Nature	Human	
		Physical	
		Digital	
	Stage	Pre core service encounters	
		Core Service Encounters	
		Post Core Service Encounters	

Figure 2. Touchpoint classification compendium, Source: Self elaboration.

To effectively manage touchpoints from an organizational perspective, it is crucial to analyze them based on their level of control. We have developed a process model tailored to guest experience by incorporating the details of other touchpoint classifications (Richardson & Li, 2010; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Kranzbühler et al., 2019) into the Keyser summary (see *figure 3)*.
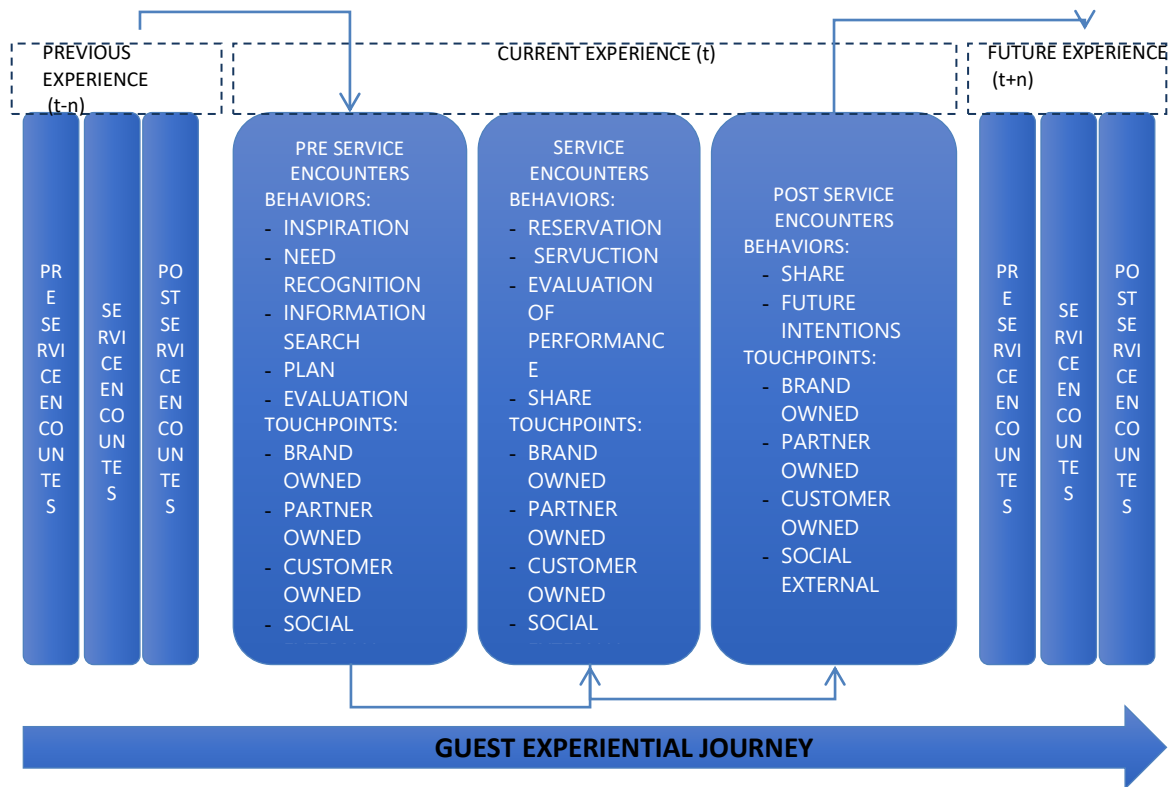
Figure 3. Process Model for Guest Experience. Adaptation of Lemon&Verhoef Process Model for customer journey and experience to the hotel context. Source: Self elaboration.

During the focus groups, the service encounters were identified by analyzing each of the customer behaviors in the guest experience journey, including inspiration, need, recognition, information, reservation, use, evaluation of performance, and share. *Figure 2* shows the main thirty-one encounters related to the stage of the customer journey in which they occur. Identifying these key encounters provides a foundation for customer journey analysis, which can aid in understanding the sequencing of customer experiences.

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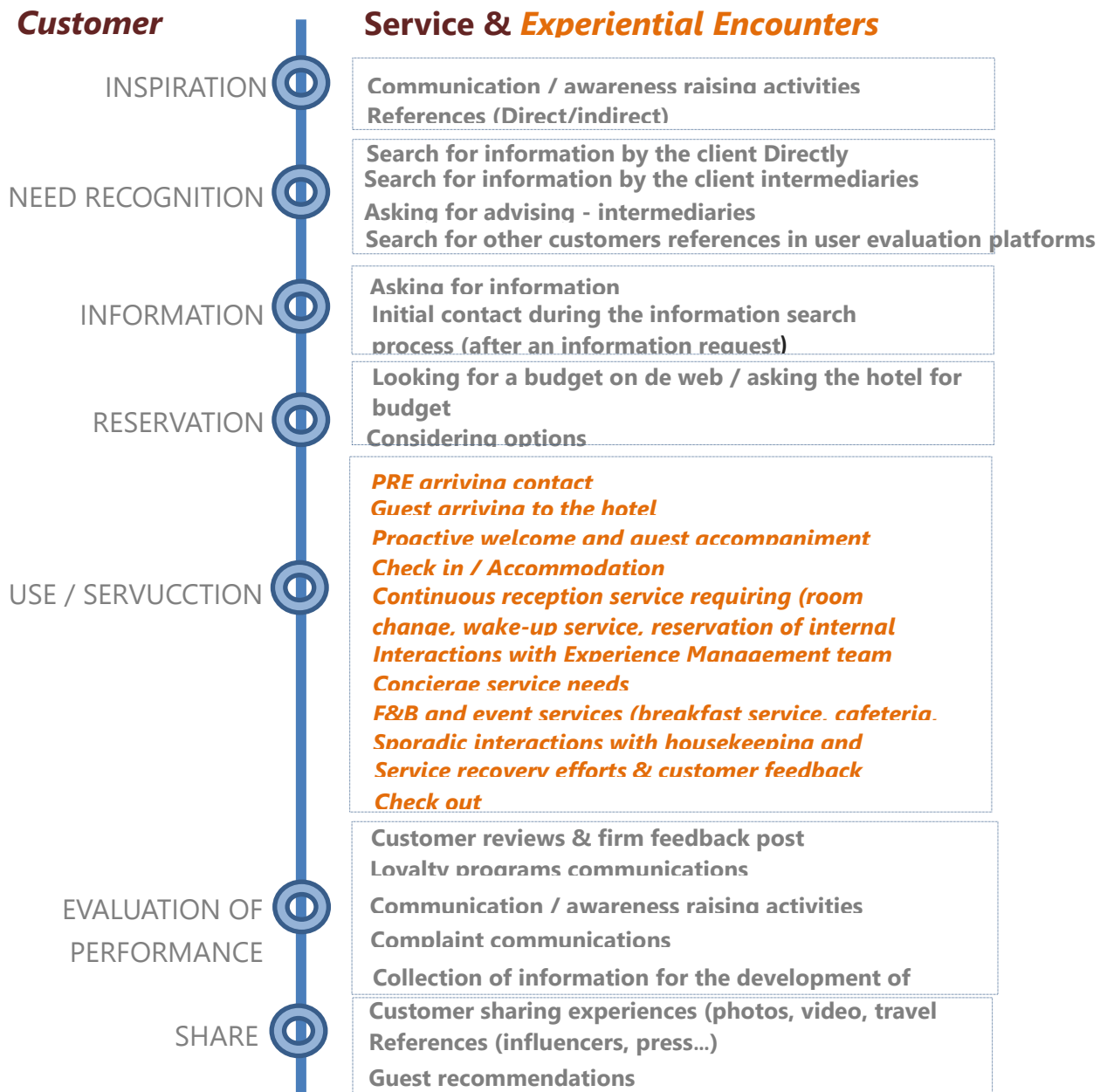
Figure 4. Service and experiential encounters related to the customer behaviors. Source: Self elaboration.

The analysis of experiential encounters has identified touchpoints based on customer behavior. These touchpoints include interactions with employees, other customers, technologies, or intermediaries. The service encounters have been itemized and touchpoints have been detailed.

Each touchpoint has been classified by typology, including products, interactions, messages, and settings, as well as by who controls it, such as brand, partner, customer or social. The related organizational entities o functions have been linked to each touchpoint, allowing them to add value to the guest. Please refer to *figure 5* for more information. Knowing the contact points associated with a function enables the

organization to establish the function's objectives, which are linked to the value contribution through the touchpoints, and competency management.

Figure 5. Example of the level of detail and the classification of touchpoints made. Source: Self elaboration.

The servuction behavior has 93 touchpoints, including 37 products, 34 interactions (2 by phone, 3 virtual and, 29 in person), 1 message, and 21 settings.

The majority of touchpoints (88) are controllable by the organization/brand, while only a small portion is owned by partners (4) and customer (1).

The lists detailed nature allowed for validation by the experts during the focus groups. Experts identified touchpoints that generate differentiation and positive experiences. The following aspects were identified:

- The touchpoints associated with service encounters during the inspiration stage should focus on generating curiosity and providing unexpected experiences to create a positive customer experience.
- For touchpoints related to the stages of need recognition, information gathering, and reservation, it is important to prioritize product coherence, accuracy, and uniqueness for the client. During the reservation process, it is crucial to ensure ease of use.
- During Servuction, positive experiences can be generated through various key aspects in touchpoints. These include focusing on client's needs, avoiding standardization during interactions (while still aligning with corporate standards), providing accurate and concise information, delivering emotional messages, smiling, using the guest's name and

     providing recognition, and maintaining eye contact during in-person touchpoints.

- During the performance evaluation process, guests provide feedback and share their experiences. It is important to encourage customer feedback empathetically and reactively, being honest and using it to improve and adapt their experience as quickly as possible.
- Social media has made sharing experiences during use or servuction more common, making this aspect of the experience crucial for a company's online reputation and marketing success.
- Performance evaluations are typically conducted during use or servuction.

The deployment and classification of all touchpoints provide a comprehensive, holistic, and in-depth understanding of the process of creating the patient experience. This, when linked to organizational entities, provides a structure for control and improvement.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study highlights the critical importance of controlling the generation of customer experiences, particularly for service companies.

By focusing on the customer journey and behavior, certain service encounters can be identified where contact between the customer and organization intensifies. The experience is generated through touchpoints in these encounters.

After reviewing the existing literature and implementing the focus group methodology, this section discusses the results and provides a final response to the research goals. It also delves into the process of experience generation from a business perspective.

From the hotel's perspective, we have identified the objectives to achieve, both directly and indirectly, in each stage of the experiential process. Firstly, we identified the experiential encounters and touchpoints through which value is generated for the guest. Secondly, we pointed out the key elements of a hotel customer´s experience, the linked providers, and the managerial areas related to guest experience generation.

Twenty-two service encounters linked to seven main guest behaviors have been identified. One of these encounters has been identified as an experiential encounter linked to service within the establishment itself. These encounters have the greatest influence on the guest experience.

According to experience management experts, the majority of touchpoints in the guest experience journey are generated through service encounters during the use/servuction

stage. Therefore, firms consider this stage to be the most important for controlling and managing the guest experience.

Ninety-three touchpoints have been identified in relation to the servuction process. Of these, 37 are products, 34 are interactions (2 by phone, 3 virtual, and 29 in person), 1 is a message, and 21 are settings.

The organization/brand controls the majority of touchpoints (88), while the partners own a small portion (4) and customers own an even smaller portion (1).

The research findings provide a solid foundation for any hotel firm to analyze their guest journeys from a management perspective. However, as Richardson & Li (2010) pointed out, each company must analyze its own case and from its own perspective. This involves answering questions such as whether the touchpoints address customers' motivations, answer their questions, or allay their concerns. Are the touchpoints working effectively for both novice and experts customers? Are they addressing your customers' underlying and latent needs? Is there consistency in tone, messaging, and language across all touchpoints? Is your brand being communicated clearly and effectively? Are the touchpoints helping to differentiate you from your competitors and retain customers?

The research output provides extensive insight into the touchpoints that each organization must consider when addressing the aforementioned questions. This approach ensures control over the creation of experiences.

Becker and Jaakkola previously concluded that studies often focus on measuring customer experience at the touchpoint level. However, the literature is unclear about how the interplay of diverse stimuli affects customer experience. Therefore, future research should study the interaction between types of stimuli and their dynamic effect on customer experience. This research focuses on encounters and touchpoints. However, to complete the understanding of the guest experience generation, further research must analyze specific cases, analyzing the context (individual, social, market and environmental) and the qualities (participation, dimensionality, time flow, valence, ordinariness).

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