CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN A MASS-CATERING SERVICE

Using customer feedback to understand attitudes and improvement ideas

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Abstract

Literature suggests that it is of value for organizations to receive customer feedback to stay competitive in the marketplace. Feedback may be used to improve existing and to develop new products. Customer experience is considered as one of the main focal areas of the innovation process. This paper studied the customer experience of the mass-catering service inductively by exploring the attitudes of the customers towards the service, as well as by analyzing customers' improvement ideas regarding the service.

The research approach in this study was qualitative. Some of the qualitative data has been quantified. The primary data of roughly 200 interviews were collected with semi-structured interviews, collected by approximately 50 interviewers. The generic research questions were operationalized by six interview questions. The data collection was conducted in the first part of 2018.

The respondents were found to have complex and sometimes contradicting views regarding the service. Gender and occupation were found to have an impact on the responses. Four general categories were identified according to which attitudes and improvement ideas could be captured and analyzed: food, service, place and price. These categories were found to have relationships with each other. Among customers, some categories were found to be more popular than others. It was also found that customers frequently have stated an attitude and given an improvement idea regarding the same aspect of the service. Future research could explore how innovation ideas captured in the form of customer experience feedback could be prioritized and implemented. Relationships between the established general categories may be explored further. An in-depth data analysis and more specific conclusions can be found in the confidential part of the thesis.

Keywords/tags (subjects): customer feedback, semi-structured interviews, customer experience, customer involvement in innovation

Miscellaneous (Confidential information)
Appendices are confidential indefinitely

Contents

Figures

Tables

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2018, the researcher participated in the “Data Analysis in Business Management” course. As part of the course learning objectives, one of the primary outcomes was to gather and analyze customer feedback about a mass-catering service. A senior lecturer in charge of the course supervised the process of analyzing the feedback. The collection of the interviews was performed in small groups of 2-5 people, while there were 13 teams and a little bit over fifty people involved. The interviews were semi-structured and related to the quality of the mass-catering service. Altogether, there were roughly 200 interviews collected. Because the results are confidential, the figures mentioned above are rough so that the data could not be traced back to the source.

1.2 The motivation for the research

According to Fundin and Bergman (2003, 55), it is of value to have a systematic process for obtaining feedback from customers, not only as a basis for corrective action relating to existing products but also an essential input to the new product development process. According to Schneider et al. (1998, 150), Zeithaml, Bitner (1996), and Berry (1995) have stated that to retain customers and stay competitive; many organizations are making customer perceptions of service quality a priority.

For companies, it is essential to start thinking of how organizations can adapt the customer experience into the innovative processes to gain a competitive advantage. Evidence suggests that the company can create a competitive advantage by paying attention to the experience of the customers. It was outlined that future research linking customer experience and innovation could be explored in more detail in a quantitative format, due to the lack of quantitative measures in the existing study (Bishop 2018, 12.)

Based on these sources, it is possible to conclude that having a secure method of gathering customer feedback regarding the experience from using the service is vital for an organization that seeks to remain competitive in the marketplace. As suggested by Bishop (2018, 12), research linking customer experience and innovation involving quantitative measures are needed. The acquired semi-structured interviews concerning the use of the service is an opportunity to expand in the research field of customer experience and innovation in the mass-catering industry.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

In the introductory chapter 1, the background and the motivation for the research are briefly discussed. Chapter 2 is concerned with the literature review – key concepts which are relevant to the study are described there. The situation with the theoretical framework is in the last part of the second chapter. In chapter 3, the methodology of the study is described. It covers research questions, research approach, and research context. How data is collected and analyzed is also analyzed in there. Chapter 4 handles with the results of the data analysis, as well as the verification of the results. The final chapter 5 is about discussion and conclusion based on the results of the thesis. This chapter answers the research questions and gives practical/managerial implications derived from these answers. The results are assessed in relation to existing literature. Finally, limitations of the research and recommendations for future research are given.

2 Literature review

2.1 Key concepts

2.1.1 Product/Service

The product is anything that the company can offer to a market for attention, acquisition, use or consumption that might satisfy a want or need. Broadly defined, products also include services, events, persons, places, organizations, ideas, or a mixture of these. Service, in turn, is a form of product that consists of activities, benefits, or satisfactions offered for sale that is mostly intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything. (Kotler & Armstrong 2012, 224.)

There could be recognized four types of products, which differ by customer buying behaviour, price, distribution, and promotion methods. These types of products are convenience, shopping, specialty, and unsought products. Convenience products, in particular, are consumer products and services that customers usually buy frequently, immediately, and with minimal comparison and buying effort. Convenience products are low priced, have convenient locations and mass promotion by the producer, for example, fast-food. A consumer product could be defined as a product or service bought by final consumers for personal consumption. (ibid., 226-227.)

The product quality is the characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied customer needs. There are different aspects of product quality. First is performance quality – the product's ability to perform its functions. Second is conformance quality – freedom from defects and consistency in delivering a targeted level of performance. Product features are a tool for differentiating the company's product from competitors' products. The decision to add new features should be carried out through surveying customers who have used the product. Surveys should contain questions regarding whether customers like the product, which features they like the most, which features could be added to improve the product. (ibid., 230.)

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2012, 237), services are distinguished from physical manufactured products by the four following characteristics:

- **Intangibility**: services cannot be seen, tasted, heard or smelled before purchase.
- **Inseparability**: services cannot be separated from their providers.
- **Variability**: quality of services depends on who provides them, and when, where and how.
- **Perishability**: services cannot be stored for later sale or use.

2.1.2 Customer

According to Paul (2006, 27), "A customer is any organization or individual with which you have done business over the past twelve months." Grigoroudis and Siskos (2009, 9) defined customer upon two approaches: concerning quality, "A customer is the person that assesses the quality of the offered products and services" and concerning the process, “the customer is the person or group that receives the work output.” According to these authors, the customer of a mass-catering service is defined as an individual that receives the work output from the mass-catering organization. This research deals explicitly with customers who, after receiving the work output, had assessed the service in the form of responses captured by the conducted semi-structured interviews.

2.1.3 Customer Satisfaction

Howard and Sheth (1969, 145) defined customer satisfaction as, the buyer’s cognitive state of receiving adequate or inadequate rewards for the sacrifices the buyer has made. Schiffman and Kanuk (2000, 7) define customer satisfaction as the individual’s perception of the performance of the product or service weighed against the individual’s expectations. Based on the literature, customer satisfaction shall be defined as the customer’s perception of the performance of the received service at the mass-catering organization concerning the expectations that the customer has had of that service. This customer satisfaction must be viewed in light of the sacrifices that customer has undergone – such as monetary payment for the service or the time spent waiting for receiving such service. Customer satisfaction may be considered an integral part of the customer experience that the customer has got as a result of receiving a service at the mass-catering organization.

2.1.4 Customer Experience (CX)

The customer experience (CX) includes every aspect of a company’s offering— packaging, the quality of customer service, reliability, ease of use, advertising, product and service features. CX is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with an organization. Direct interaction generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact frequently involves unplanned interactions with representations of a company’s products, services, or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports and reviews. (Schwager & Meyer 2007, 1.)

According to Shaw and Ivens (2002, 150), customer experience is a mix of the company's physical performance and the emotions raised, intuitively measured against customer expectations across all the moments of interaction.

The whole of all the clues that the company is sending to its customers makes up the customer's total experience. Clues are anything that can be perceived, sensed or recognized by its absence, by the customer. There are two clue categories that the company may send to its customers. The first is the actual functioning of the good or service. The second is the emotions and includes the smells, sounds, sights, tastes and textures of the good or service, as well as the environment in which it is offered. (Berry et al. 2002, 1.)

2.1.5 Customer Feedback

An effective service-quality information system is listening to the feedback of the three customer groups of the company: external customers that have experienced the firm's service; competitors' customers that the firm would like to acquire; internal customers (employees). This service-quality information system must be created using several methods of obtaining feedback among different customer groups. A single service-quality study is a snapshot taken at a point in time and from a particular angle. For a more in-depth insight and more informed decision-making, continuous taking of pictures from different angles must be taken, that effectively constitutes systematic listening. (Berry & Parasuraman 1997, 65.)

In one case study, researchers studied how far feedback from dissatisfied customers is transferred within the three companies in Sweden. These organizations had a systematic process to handle customer issues, and they have a good relationship with their customers. Professional database structures help the service personnel to codify information about customer claims. However, it was found that there is no formal structure to transfer customer feedback as far as to the new product development process. Transfer relies on individual networking, while a more global process structure is still diffuse. Nevertheless, there is a readiness within the organizations to use feedback from customer complaints as driving factors in the new product development process. (Fundin and Bergman 2003, 63).

2.1.6 Innovation through Co-Creation

Robinson (2017, 360) stated: ”A key aspect of the digital age is the focus away from the consumer as a passive participant being influenced by corporate decisions, and towards a complete reversal wherein the consumer dictates the need for innovation.” The capability of innovation to drive company reputation and customer loyalty based on collective judgments are made according to the evaluation of the organization’s ability to be innovative. Innovation is explained as having stages starting with an idea discovery, a blueprint, the production of beta versions for application, and the implementation of the idea. (Foroudi et al. 2016, 4882.)

The success of innovation depends on the ability to match what customers seek, with the incentives the company receives from offering the innovation. (ibid., 4883.)

2.2 Theoretical framework

This study is based on the inductive approach and has an exploratory purpose with no predefined theoretical framework. The qualitative data are collected through open-ended questions and analyzed with the help of NVivo software. As a result of the data analysis process, emerging patterns and unique ideas are identified and visualized, and as such, they represent an early attempt to formulate a mind-map of crucial concepts. Creation, formulation, and testing of a formal theoretical framework are beyond the scope of this thesis.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research questions

The purpose of this thesis was to study the customer experience of the mass-catering service in the mass-catering industry. The exploration has been done by studying what attitudes the customers have towards the offered service as well as by analyzing the improvement ideas provided by the respondents. The study was based on semi-structured interviews, which aimed at answering the following generic research questions:

1. What are the attitudes towards mass-catering service among the respondents?
2. What respondents suggest regarding the improvement of the mass-catering service?

The answers to the first question were to give a general understanding of the attitudes that the customers may have of the mass-catering service. Replies were to indicate what customers had in mind when they were asked what they had liked or disliked about the given service.

The second research question was designed to gather suggestions from customers towards the improvement of the service. The question was also used to receive new ideas for features of the service that the organization may provide to its customers in the future. One of the objectives of the thesis was to establish a possible correlation or linkages between the first and the second question.

3.2 Research approach

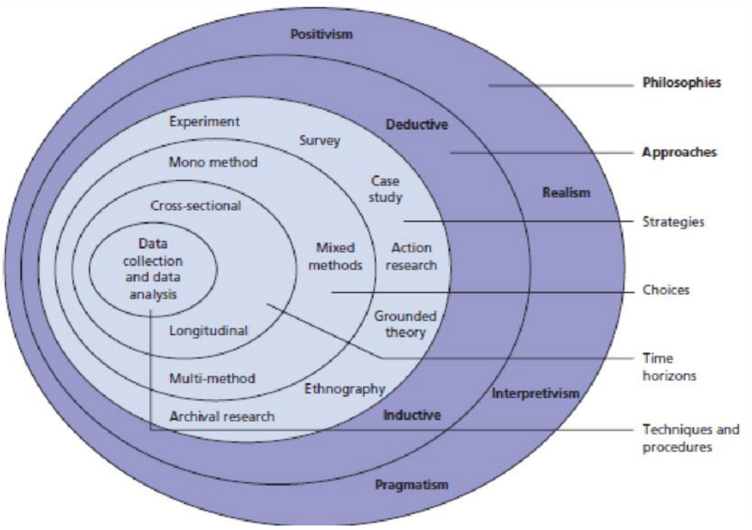

Figure 1. The research 'onion.' (adapted from Saunders et al. 2009, 108)

Figure 1 above demonstrates possible research approaches in the form of research onion by Saunders et al. (2009, 108) that affect the data collection and data analysis of the research. The following decisions were made in this research, starting from the outside and going to the center of the research onion: pragmatism, induction, survey, mixed methods, cross-sectional, qualitative data. This study has exploratory purpose.

Pragmatism recognizes that there are many ways of interpreting the world and undertaking research, that no single point of view can ever give the entire picture and that there may be multiple realities. Values play a significant role in interpreting the results in pragmatism, with the researcher adopting both objective and subjective points of view. The focus in this philosophy is on practical applied research, integrating different perspectives to help interpret the data. (Saunders et al. 2009, 109.)

For the sake of exploring the customer experience, the researcher would have to be immersing oneself into multiple points of view and diverse experiences of different customers, which corresponds well with the pragmatism philosophy.

Social science exploration is a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life. The emergent generalizations are many and varied; they include the descriptive facts, folk concepts, cultural artifacts, structural arrangements, social processes, and beliefs and belief systems normally found there. Exploratory research looks for patterns, ideas, or hypotheses, rather than research that tries to test or confirm hypothesis. (Vogt 1999, 105.)

In the inductive approach, the theory would follow data rather than vice versa as with deduction. It is usually used for the collection of qualitative data, gaining an understanding of the meanings that humans attach to events, a close understanding of the research context. Followers of induction may criticize deduction because of its tendency to construct a rigid methodology that does not permit alternative explanations of what is going on. (Saunders et al. 2009, 126.)

It may be necessary in case of researching the customer experience to allow for a less rigid research design that is concerned with exploring qualitative data.

Interviews are verbal interchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person. There are three types of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Structured follow a predetermined and standardized set of questions; the questions are asked almost in the same manner. Unstructured interviews are at the other end of the continuum: the conversations in these types of discussions are being directed by the informant, rather than by the set of questions. Semi-structured interviews are in the middle of this continuum. (Dunn 2005, 79-80.)

Consequently, semi-structured interviews are a verbal interchange where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions. Although the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are essential. Semi-structured interviews are occasionally referred to as informal, conversational or “soft” interviews. (Longhurst 2003, 103.)

Leech (2002, 665) stated that semi-structured interviewing is a middle ground between structured and unstructured interviews; one that can provide detail, depth, and an insider's for perspective, while at the same time allowing hypothesis testing and the quantitative analysis of interview responses. According to Saunders et al. (2009, 323), Healey and Rawlinson (1994) cited: “one section of an interview may ask a common set of factual questions … while in another section a semi-structured qualitative approach may be used to explore [responses]”. Respondents’ occupation would be best determined using a structured approach, whereas other questions would have used a semi-structured approach.

According to Saunders et al. (2009, 323), Cooper and Schindler (2008) stated that when undertaking an exploratory study, or a study that includes an exploratory element, it is likely that the researcher will include non-standardized (qualitative) research interviews in the research design. This thesis has an exploratory purpose, and so the non-standardized interviewing is used to gain insights into the customer experience to accumulate the qualitative data and process it with the help of computer-supported qualitative data analysis software.

The term “mixed methods” refers to an emergent methodology of research that advances the systematic integration, or “mixing,” of quantitative and qualitative data within a single investigation or sustained program of inquiry (Wisdom and Creswell 2013, 1). Various notions in the research literature share the idea that qualitative and quantitative methods should be recognized as complementary rather than as opposite (Jick 1979, 602). According to Soltaninejad (2017, 37), Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) stated that quantitative data and method could improve the qualitative research by providing more comprehensive, in-depth, extensive, elaborate or fuller answers to research questions.

Saunders et al. (2009) stated that there might be occasions when the researcher may want to quantify some of the qualitative data. They mentioned that quantification might be useful to count the frequency of references to a phenomenon. (Saunders et al. 2009, 497.)

This research would be qualitatively driven, using the qualitative data that was collected from the semi-structured interviews but with some quantitative methods applied for presenting a fuller picture, achieved through the quantification of the qualitative data.

Cross-sectional studies are carried out at a one-time point or over a short period. The advantages of cross-sectional studies are that they are relatively inexpensive and takes little time to conduct, can estimate the prevalence of outcome of interest, with many results and risk factors can be assessed. However, these provide only a snapshot, and the situation may change over time. It is also hard to make a causal inference. (Levin 2006, 24-25.)

According to Ahmad (2008, 369), Cooper and Schindler (2003) define ethics as the "norms or standards of behavior that guide moral choices about our behavior and our relationships with others."

According to Saunders et al. (2009), the subject of research ethics has essential implications for the negotiation of access to people and organizations and the collection of data. Authors also state that the general ethical issue is that the research design should not subject those who are being researched to embarrassment, harm, or any other material disadvantage. (ibid., 160.)

This avoidance of harm (non-maleficence) can be seen as the cornerstone of the ethical issues that confront those who undertake research (ibid., 186). As several of the examples of the critical ethical issues, Saunders et al. (2009) bring the privacy of possible and actual participants, voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw entirely or partially from the process, maintenance of the confidentiality of data provided by individuals or identifiable participants and their anonymity. (ibid., 185-186.)

According to the principle of non-maleficence, the research design has been taking interviews from respondents with consent and has provided the right to withdraw from the process partially or entirely. The research design also anonymizes both the respondents, as well as the company – to avoid harming any of the parties involved. To take extra measures at protecting the identity of those who were being researched, the results and data analysis part are confidential and publicly not available.

3.3 Research context

The data have been collected in one location from the customers of the company offering mass-catering service in Europe.

3.4 Data collection

At the data collection stage of the research, the task for the interviewer groups was to collect semi-structured interviews. The groups were asked to interview customers who have confirmed that they have used the service at least once. At the same time, convenience sampling was employed in this research. Convenience sampling involves selecting haphazardly those cases that are easiest to obtain for the sample until the sample size has been reached. (Saunders et al. 2009, 241.)

In total, 13 groups were assembled out of 51 interviewers, with between two and five team members in each researcher group. The overall breakdown of the group structure can be seen in table 1.

Type of the group	**Number of groups**
5-person groups	6
4-person groups	1
3-person groups	5
2-person groups	1
Total:	13

Table 1. Groups structure of the interview collecting process

Groups were allowed to take interviews with members from their group, who have used the service – in other words, interview each other. However, the same interviewee could not be interviewed by an interviewer from another group to prevent the double-counting. Per one group member, a group has had to collect five interviews, although some groups have accumulated less than required five discussions per person in a group. The interviews have been video recorded, stored by a mobile cloud-based mobile app called Jaxber and then transferred to NVivo- a qualitative data analysis software. Interviews have been collected with the one-on-one format, one interviewer and several respondents, several interviewers and one respondent or several interviewers and several respondents.

Interviewers have captured semi-structured interviews. Interview groups have asked the following six questions:

1. Are you employed, or are you a student?
2. What do you like about the service?
3. What don't you like about the service?
4. What would you like to improve the service?
5. What new or extra service you may suggest the company to implement?
6. Any additional comment?

The first question is aimed at establishing the customer type of the respondent. The first question is demographic, while all other questions are open-ended. The answer to the first question provided a categorical variable, which was later used to code the respondent's group in the NVivo 11.

Second and third interview questions are aimed at answering the first research question, outlined previously: "What are the attitudes towards mass-catering service among the respondents?" Consequently, fourth and fifth interview questions address the second research question: "What respondents suggest regarding the improvement of the mass-catering service?"

The sixth question about any additional comments by the respondent is an open question. According to O'Cathain and Thomas (2004, 25), strategic use of open questions at the end of the questionnaire may optimize the quality of the data and the analysis, increase response rates, reduce dilemmas regarding whether and how to analyze such data, and result in a more ethical approach to making best use of the data which respondents kindly provide. It was strategically targeted at getting a response that was not covered previously in other items, hence increasing the response rate and making the answers potentially a richer dataset.

The answer to the sixth question often could be recognized as a response to the second, third, fourth, or fifth questions. In other words, the respondent that has answered the sixth question has effectively expanded his/her answer on one or more of the other questions. For example, if the respondent has mentioned in the 6th question that s/he prefers the quality of the food, this response was coded as an answer to the 2nd question. The researcher used subjective reasoning to determine the most appropriate placing of the answer to the 6th question. Table 2 below shows the number of responses and response rate to 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th questions.

Question	**Number of responses**	**Response rate**
Are you employed or are you a student?	203	100,0%
What do you like about the service?	187	92,1%
What don't you like about the service?	178	87,7%
What would you like to improve in the service?	168	82,8%
What new or extra service you may suggest the service to implement?	111	54,7%

Table 2. The response rate for interview questions

The response rate is only 100% of the first question. Second, third and fourth questions are close to the 100% response rate, with the lowest of these being at 82.3%. The 5th question has the least response rate, with only nearly half of the respondents responding to the question. As outlined above, answers to the 6th question were encoded as responses to other questions. During the interviewing, most of the questions have been asked in the exact format as given above. However, there sometimes have been slight differentiation in terms of how the question was asked — for example, using synonyms for some of the words in the question above.

Transcription of the interviews usually begins after recording interviews – that is, reproduced as a written (word-processed) account using the actual words (Saunders et al. 2009, 485). Hence, after the data collection (interviewing respondents) began the process of transcribing the interviews from collected videos to qualitative analysis software NVivo. It was done by listening to the videos with interviews and then typing the text into the software. Each group of interviewers (described in the data collection part) has transcribed videos that they have collected. The transcript of the interview was later analyzed with the computer assisted qualitative analysis software tool (CAQDAS) called NVivo.

3.5 Data analysis

The data analysis in this research was done by following the inductive principles as described previously in the research approach. According to Saunders et al. (2009, 508), since an inductively led approach deals with qualitative data, it means that it operates with a less defined explanation of the phenomenon to be analyzed, and that explanation is not based on an existing theory. Saunders et al. (2009, 505) also stated that data display and analysis are suited to an inductive strategy to analyze qualitative data. Collected data with semi-structured interviews were qualitative; hence, this technique was found suitable to be applied in this research.

Saunders et al. (2009, 503-505), Miles and Huberman (1994) described three concurrent broad tasks for qualitative data analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data reduction includes summarizing and simplifying the data collected and selectively focusing on some parts of this data. This process aims to transform the data and to condense it. Lengthy, unreduced text in the form of interview transcripts, field notes, documents, and so on is cumbersome because it is dispersed over many pages and is not easy to see as a whole. For this purpose, qualitative data display may be applied. Data display through visual format shows information in a systematic way, so the user can draw conclusions and take necessary action. There are two main families of data display: matrices and networks. Matrices are generally tabular in form, with defined columns and rows, where data are entered selectively into the appropriate cells of such a matrix. A network is a collection of nodes or points connected by links or lines that display streams of participant actions, events, and processes. Networks lend themselves well to a case-oriented approach that re-creates the “plot” of events over time, as well as showing complex interrelationships between variables. (ibid., 503-505.)

Saunders et al. (2009, 481) state that CAQDAS (Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) may help with undertaking routine qualitative data management tasks manually such as sorting your data into categories and locating subsets of these data according to specified criteria. Saunders et al. (2009, 514) also mention that the use of CAQDAS (Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) offers several advantages – when used systematically, it can aid continuity and increase both transparency and methodological rigor. In this research, NVivo 11 Pro (CAQDAS) was used at the stages of qualitative data reduction, data display and consequently – when the conclusions were drawn. This CAQDAS was also used for some quantification of the data. However, Campbell et al. (2013, 308) mentioned that when doing qualitative analysis research requires deep and repeated immersion in the transcript data, as coding per se is no substitute for such immersion – even with the use of CAQDAS. Hence, the researcher has continually returned to the transcript data, without overly relying on the coding on its own.

Quantification of the data may be beneficial for research dealing with qualitative data, for example, when the researcher wishes to count the frequency of references to a phenomenon. These frequencies may be displayed using a table summarizing the number of cases or diagram and CAQDAS can be of help in this process. Although, the data resulting from such quantification may be viewed as supplementary to the qualitative data in research that collects qualitative data. (Saunders et al. 2009, 497.)

In this study, several tables and diagrams are derived from quantification of qualitative data and used in conjunction with qualitative data to acquire more meaningful and valid results from such data analysis.

3.6 Verification of the results

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 294) stated that for judging the soundness of the qualitative research, four criteria could be applied: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Trochim (2006) mentions that these four criteria are more suitable for evaluating the rigour of qualitative research than traditional quantitative criteria.

3.6.1 Credibility

The credibility criteria involve establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participant in the study. Given the perspective, the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, hence the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results. (Trochim 2006.)

The credibility of this research is mainly linked to the research problem dealing with customer experience, which is highly subjective. The data analysis and results were grounded in the collected interviews of the customers. The researcher made an extra effort to present the results of the interviews in an as accurate and unbiased manner as possible. However, the researcher has not obtained feedback on the final data analysis results from the respondents.

3.6.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings. From a qualitative perspective, transferability is primarily the responsibility of the one doing the generalizing. The qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by doing a thorough job of describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. The person who wishes to "transfer" the results to a different context is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is. (Trochim 2006.)

The data from over 200 collected interviews can be perceived as statistically significant for generalizing about the population of roughly 1000 daily customers. However, the study utilized convenience sampling, which has its limitations. It does not guarantee that the sample will be representative of the population.

Moreover, there are apparent differences between the sample size of respondents with different occupation status and different genders. Thus, there might be different results if a different set of respondents was interviewed. The research was completed in one location of a mass-catering service company in Europe, which may not be easily transferable to other contexts. Also, due to the ethical considerations, the researcher has had to limit the descriptions of the research context, and so it will be hard for future researchers to evaluate and establish the transferability based on this study.

3.6.3 Dependability

Dependability is about the researcher's responsibility to provide enough information about the research process. To establish the trustworthiness, the research process must be logical, traceable and documented. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294.) The researcher should account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs. The researcher must also report any changes happening in the research settings and whether these have affected the way the research approached the study. (Trochim 2006.)

The research methodology was informed by the literature review to make sure it is suitable to study the phenomena. The researcher has given an in-depth description of the methodology of the research – what are the questions, what is the approach to the study, how the data was collected and analyzed. There were some limitations, however, due to the ethical considerations that demand anonymization and desensitization of some parts of the research not to harm the organization and the interviewees involved.

During the data collection phase, the researcher has not observed any significant changes in the research context. All interviews were collected within approximately 2-4 weeks. However, during the data analysis stage, it has taken nearly one year between the data collection and the final results produced. The researcher is not able to verify the presence/absence of the changes in the research context due to the inability to visit the mass-catering service at the time of the completion of the thesis.

3.6.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. The researcher can actively search for and describe negative instances that contradict previous observations. After the study, the researcher can conduct a data audit that examines the data collection and analysis procedures and makes judgments about the potential for bias or distortion. (Trochim 2006.)

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 294) stated that confirmability is about linking findings and interpretations to the data in ways that can be easily understood by others.

Due to the ethical standards of the researcher, it is impossible to share the data analysis results with the public, and hence, it is hard for others to verify the findings by in any future research. However, the study contains an assessment of the findings of the current research. The researcher has also conducted several audits of the data throughout the process of data analysis to duly locate and fix mistakes and errors in the data analysis results. Limitations of the research containing the potential for bias or error were found during these data audits and described in the part of the limitations of the study. The researcher made an extra effort by the use of NVivo 11 to rigorously support the conclusions by the empirical evidence captured in the interviews.

4 Results

As a result, the author was able to analyze the semi-structured interviews, quantify them, and find the results which could be used to answer the two outlined research questions. The results of this research are confidential until 05.06.2039. The thesis committee from JAMK University of Applied Sciences can find the results of the research in Appendix 1 for the evaluation of this thesis.

5 Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Answers to the research questions

Customers of the mass-catering service have complex and sometimes conflicting attitudes towards the service. Respondents also have many improvement suggestions and new ideas to implement in the mass-catering service. Perspectives and ideas were grouped into four general categories. These categories are food-related, service-related, place-related and price. The categories are mentioned in the sequential order from the most to the least popular. The food-related category was subsequently divided into food variety and food quality and taste. The respondents mentioned competitors’ services when expressing attitudes or new ideas. Competition might have influenced what customers stated.

According to the data, more people have expressed their attitudes than proposed new ideas. Simultaneously, respondents have stated in different proportions their opinions and new suggestions for different general categories. There were no mentions of new insights regarding the price and few thoughts regarding the price improvement. Hence, different general categories may drive specific attitudes or improvement ideas. Data also shows that some respondents mentioned gender and occupation when expressing perspectives or improvement ideas. Thus, gender and occupation may be an influential factor in determining opinions and new suggestions.

Customers frequently gave improvement ideas regarding specific aspects they have stated they disliked. Often the improvement idea was attributed to one category, whereas the element they dislike was attributed to another group. It may be evidence of interrelatedness of four general categories in the mass-catering service. It may also be an effect of the researcher's judgment and interpretation of the answer, as depicted in Figure 2 in the limitations of the research. Implementation of improvements may have an impact on the price. We may, therefore, conclude that there may be different types of relationships between the general categories – direct (improving one leads to improving the other) and inverse (improving one leads to worsening the other).

Multiple customers outlined that their attitudes and improvement ideas depend on the time of the day. Hence, customers might try interacting with the service in a specific manner, depending on the time of the day. For example, a customer may try to avoid long queues at a specific time of the day and try to have lunch at a different time, when the lines are shorter. In the interviews, some customers stated that they use the service frequently, whereas others rarely. The customer experience that respondents have may differ significantly between frequent and occasional customers of the service. There may be a relationship between the time of the day and how much exposure the customer has had with the service.

The number of responses given for different categories may prove useful in prioritizing the list of improvement ideas for possible implementation. Respondents most frequently mentioned food-related topics. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the company could focus more on improving the food-related aspects. It is expectedly essential to take into consideration the costs of implementing improvements. It may be necessary to consider return-on-investment from an improvement idea, as well as to compare several enhancements with each other to determine the best one. An additional or separate study of a customers' attitudes towards competition may bring extra clarification, which improvement ideas should be prioritized.

5.2 Practical/managerial implications

Management can make more informed decisions by involving customers in innovation. Such involvement may lead to a higher success chance for projects. By interviewing, it is possible to find out customers' attitudes and improvement ideas regarding the service. In the process of analyzing interviews, management may find out many new ideas. Arguably, knowledge of the customers' attitudes and improvement ideas allow businesses to have more actionable knowledge and informed decisions. Reality-based decisions may lead to a better focus on acute topics and offer greater efficiency regarding innovation. Management may also expect a data-based report about customer experience and satisfaction. A company can use this report to justify a change or other management decisions.

Quantification of the interviews may help in finding out which attitudes and improvement ideas are more popular among the customers. Businesses would be able to use this quantified information to establish the relative importance of the customer experience aspects. Quantified results may help to develop more valid and reliable comparisons needed for justification of resource allocation. There is evidence that occupation and gender of the respondent influenced attitudes towards the service. For businesses, it may be essential to consider the categorical values of customers to have better information about the causes for customer experience. Such categorical values are simpler to analyze with the use of quantitative data.

Nevertheless, completely substituting qualitative data with quantified findings derived from the qualitative data can lead to loss of context and reduce the power of interpretation. The data results in this study showed numerous rarely mentioned improvement and new ideas. Some radical ideas may lead to disruptive innovation. However, quantitatively such ideas were rarely mentioned. For example, introducing a lunch ticket system, or a smartphone app to pre-order food online. Interpretations of the quantitative findings are also based on the text. Hence, it is essential to use quantified data only as an extension to the qualitative data of the interviews.

Some of the proposed improvement ideas may be of little or no value to the company. Management should critically review findings which result from interviewing customers — quite a significant number of customers suggested an improvement that could cannibalize lunch sales revenue. Management might want to continue the analysis of the received feedback from customers. Hence, the company may benefit from the knowledge of customers' attitudes and new ideas, but it should not be limited to this knowledge only for the sake of achieving the company's objectives.

5.3 Assessment of the results in relation to existing research

Yap and Kew (2007, 59) mentioned that service quality and customer satisfaction had a direct positive effect on a customer's likelihood of revisiting the restaurant. In this study, however, some respondents indicated that even though they disliked the service quality – they still have had to use it because of being forced to due to the lack of alternative options. The possible effect may be related to the location of the mass-catering service, where there are few alternative options around.

Qin and Prybutok (2009, 90) stated in the research of fast-food restaurants that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction. Food characteristics are influential factors in making decisions about the selection of fast-food restaurants. They also said that providing fresh, tasty, and a variety of food and beverages is an essential criterion for customer satisfaction. (Qin & Prybutok 2009, 90.)

This thesis found that customers have given most of their comments regarding food-related issues. Customers mentioned a variety of food and beverages, as well as food quality and taste. Respondents indicated the freshness of the food as something likable. Service-related issues, including service quality, were also stated frequently in the responses.

Research by Ryu et al. (2012, 200) shows that the quality of the physical environment and food were predictors of customer perceived value. The quality of the physical environment, food, and service were significant determinants of the restaurant image, which was found to be a predictor of customer perceived value. In turn, customer perceived value was found to be a determinant of customer satisfaction. (Ryu et al. 2012, 200.)

Respondents were found speaking about the same issues in a similar context. Data in this thesis shows that customers talked about the quality of the physical environment, food, and service when interviewers asked them what they like and dislike about the service in research. At the same time, in this research, respondents spoke about some issues more frequently than about others. For more upscale restaurants, the prioritization in what is more important may be different.

A systematic process for obtaining feedback from the customers is an essential input to the new product development process (Fundin & Bergman 2003, 55). This research has found a significant number of attitudes, improvement and new ideas regarding the existing service. However, it is possible to argue that the company may implement many of these ideas in a mass-catering service in another location. Quantity of responses for different issues could be recognized as a factor showing the importance of a feature that must be developed or implemented in a new service location.

5.4 Limitations of the research

The thesis has several limitations, including the methodology, which utilizes qualitative data. Transferability of the results is also an important issue. This research has based its findings on data analysis of the mass-catering service. Hence, there are potential limitations to transferring the results to any other service/business. Mann (2003, 56) stated that a study with a low response rate could be criticized because it can miss significant differences in the responders and non-responders. In this research, some of the questions were lower than 90% response rate, with the lowest response rate approaching 54%.

Customers were likely to speak about the same issue when answering subsequent questions. For example, when stating their negative attitudes, some respondents included suggestions for improvements. Hence, it is possible that wording of the questions and understanding of them by the respondent may have significant influence over the given answer. Those two factors consequently influence the evaluation of the customer experience. The answers were not always clear as the majority of the respondents were non-native speakers of English. The researcher has had difficulties interpreting the responses. Thus, clarity of the answers may also lead to distortion of the information and influence the evaluation of the customer experience. As part of data analysis, the researcher categorized the responses using the researcher's judgment. Researcher's judgment is another potential source for a biased interpretation of the customer experience. Figure 2 below represents the model according to which the outlined factors are a potential source of bias or error in interpretation of the results.

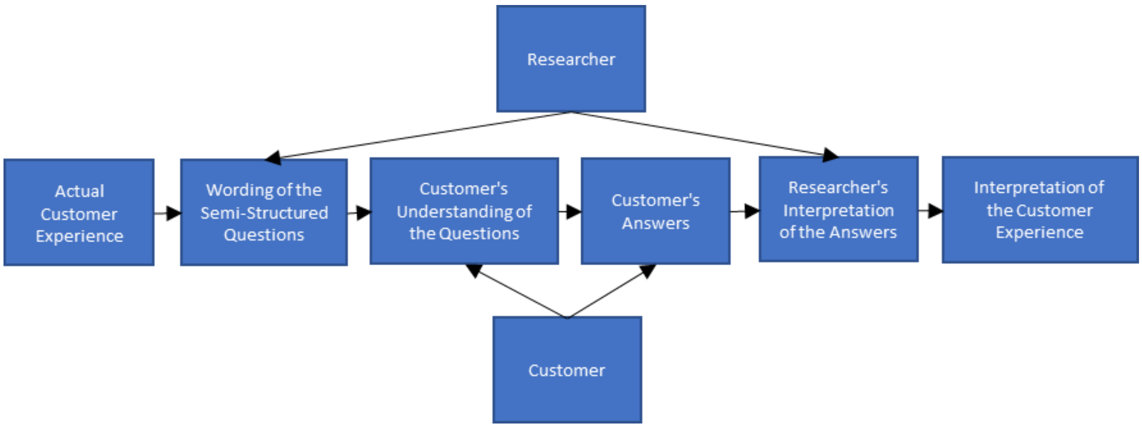

Figure 2. Model of potential sources of bias in the research process

Outlined factors may lead to a difference between the actual customer experience and the interpretation of the customer experience. Researcher and customer are also shown in the model to outline tfFigureheir influence on potential sources of bias and error. The researcher influences the wording of the semi-structured questions and interpretation of the answers. Customer is responsible for understanding the questions and giving a response which would then be interpreted by the researcher.

In the research, convenience sampling was used – a method to choose respondents who are available and easy to find (Saunders et al. 2009, 241). As a result, the demographics of the interviews are uneven, with a significant difference between gender and the occupation status of the respondents. Because of the sampling technique and the unbalanced demographics, there might be a bias towards giving specific responses. Some customers stated they had had different levels of experience using the service. Although, not all customers noted the frequency of using the service. Customers who were using the service for longer might have had a more in-depth view. However, less experienced customers might have also given a completely different point of view. As a result, data may be distorted by respondents with varying experiences about the service.

Respondents were customers of the company. Responses could be subjective and have a different meaning than what the researcher has understood during analysis. It is also possible that interviewees could not describe their thoughts accurately. A language barrier may also be a cause for communicating ideas effectively as the respondents were non-native speakers of English. Respondents who are more proficient with English may have given more in-depth answers than those who were lacking English skills. Customers differed in the volume of their responses. Hence, customers who gave more in-depth answers made it possible to make more codes at the stage of data analysis. Less expressive customers gave shallower comments and thus may be underrepresented in the data.

Data collectors (interviewing groups) were inexperienced researchers and might have influenced the responses by lacking the rapport. Also, data collection groups have polled their members. Potential bias might be in giving specific answers as interviewee and interviewer at the same time. Also, the interviews sometimes were collected by two or more interviewers. Occasionally there was more than one respondent in the same interview – respondents gave answers in the queue. Respondents might have been peer-pressured into repeating previous interviewees' statements or modifying their responses. Emotions of the respondents or any other contextual information were not transcribed – the researcher analyzed only what respondents have stated. Thus, the data could lack crucial insights into the contextual data, which was not recorded.

5.5 Recommendations for future research

Suggestions for future research may stem from the findings and new questions raised, as well as the above-described limitations. Competition could be included in the survey in the future to offer a more holistic picture. This research has shown that competitor services might have influenced customers' attitudes and improvement ideas. Future research may focus on exploring further the topics of return-on-investment calculations, where the return is the improvement in the customer experience, whereas investment is the cost needed to provide such improvement. Relationships between the established categories may be explored further, as well as its effect on the customer experience of the mass-catering service.

Data collection and analysis could be improved. For example, findings from the thesis may be used to compile a quantitative questionnaire in future research instead of conducting qualitative interviews. Questions could be refined, and new questions for measuring other aspects could be added. Another methodology could be used to enable new perspectives – such as performing unstructured interviews or focusing on quantitative-driven study design instead. Future researchers should consider providing an opportunity to respond in different languages to decrease language barriers for non-native speakers of English. Surveys may include a question aimed at measuring how long the customer has been using the service.

Better sampling techniques could be implemented – those that limit the possibility to underrepresent any demographic group. At the same time, repeating the demographics could be of value for further research to verify the results of this study. The effect of time may give a new perspective on whether the attitudes have changed. Future research may also focus on one specific demographic group to explore in-depth the views of such a group. It is suggested that respondents can give an equal volume of responses to make the data less influenced by the expressive interviewees. For this, it is possible to ask to provide a specific number of sentences or attitudes.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Results of the research

The results of this research are confidential until 05.06.2039.