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Transforming mundane experiences: exploring customer well-being of the commuting journey

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Introduction: Improving well-being through transformative service has been highlighted as a research priority in recent years (Ostrom et al., 2010; 2015) with traditional service research criticised for rarely considering the broader outcomes resulting from service experiences (Anderson et al., 2013). With continuous usage of service and a number of interactions that customers have with services and service systems in their daily lives, it becomes critical for researchers to look beyond typical service measures like customer satisfaction and loyalty, and investigate the transformative outcomes that can potentially be resulted from service experiences (Anderson et al., 2013; Ostrom et al., 2015). To date, studies have neglected the possible effects of service experiences on customers lives, particularly in the context of well-being within every-day or otherwise mundane service settings, including commuting experiences by public transport, the context for this study.

Customer experiences do not occur in a dyadic but in a dynamic nature, consisting multiple touch points and stages in the course of the journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Despite the increasing interest in customer experiences, there is a limited empirical work from the customer journey perspective (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Voorhees et al., 2016). How the experiences evolve across multiple touch points and stages during the entire journey, and how these relate to the overall experience and key customer outcomes still remains under-researched (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).Accordingly, this study explores the customers' commuting journey by understanding the flow of interactions and possible touch points that customers typically follow along the journey, and also to gain an insight of the potential effects that it has on the overall commuting experience and customer well-being. By exploring across the entire customer journey, this study not only contributes to the conceptualisation of the notion of a holistic and dynamic customer journey, but also provides a different perspective of the transformative effect of such everyday experiences which do not have implicitly transformative goals as opposed to more transformational services such as healthcare and education.

Theoretical Framework: Scholars and practitioners have come to agree that customer experience is dynamic and a static or snapshot understanding from organisations' perspective is no longer sufficient (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Recently, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) propose a process model for customer journey and experience, emphasising the flow of customer experience process from pre-purchase to purchase to post-purchase, and different touch points including brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external touch points. The importance of touch points varies in each stage, depending on the nature of the product/service or the customer's journey itself (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, it is not a single touch point that affects the overall service experience, but more broadly the interplay between, and the combined effect of, all touch points (Pareigis, Edvardsson, & Enquist, 2011), thus a holistic examination of the effect of touch points throughout the journey is needed. However, when examining dynamic effects of these touch points, existing researchers do not account for the possible existence of halo effects that may occur along the journey. The term halo effect emerged from the psychology field to describe the "tendency to think of the people in general as rather good or rather inferior and to colour the judgements of the

qualities by this general feeling" (Thorndike, 1920, p.25). In marketing, a few studies have investigated halo effects in the context of satisfaction both from customers' (Mittal, Kumar, & Tsiros, 1999; Wirtz & Bateson, 1995) and businesses' perspectives (van Doorn, 2008), while other studies have applied it on brand studies (e.g. Borah & Tellis, 2016; Leuthesser, Kohli, & Harich, 1995) and store image measurement (Wu & Petroshius, 1987). Similar to the studies discussed above, a halo effect is expected to exist in the context of the customer journey in that the experience at one touch point can influence experiences at other touch points across the journey and the experience overall. Additionally, the possible existence of a halo effect in relation to the link between customer experiences and the state of customer well-being, to date, has not been addressed.

Methodology: Exploring customers' commuting experience requires an insight into the touch points that customers typically encounter in the course of a journey. A qualitative research approach, using both the critical incident technique (CIT) and sequential incident technique (SIT), was employed to build an in-depth and holistic understanding of the phenomenon. For the purpose of this study, the process-oriented approach of SIT is useful to elicit the description of touch points encountered by informants during their commuting journey, while the CIT helps to capture a specific touch point or journey that may seem less noticeable to the informant when asking about such a mundane activity but does have an impact to the overall experience and well-being. Being known as story-telling methods, interviews have been commonly utilised for both the CIT and SIT. Data collection is work in progress but, to date, 16 semi-structured interviews have been conducted in Glasgow with different modes of public transport and length of journeys. The informants were selected using the snowball sampling technique where a small group of initial informants were asked to provide referrals who share or know of others who commute by public transport that make them eligible for inclusion in the study, and this process, to date, will continue until the data saturation is achieved (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The data obtained from the interviews have been transcribed and analysed thematically with the aid of Nvivo.

Findings and discussion: Data reveals some distinct elements of customer experience touch points across stages of the commuting journey, providing an insightful contextualization to the conceptual model of customer journey and experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). By exploring the entire journey, different touch points, including brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external-owned touch points (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), can be mapped out across different stages of the commuting journey to see which touch points are more relevant to specific stages. This study discovers that not all touch points occur at each stage and the overall commuting experience can be a result of a combination of relevant touch points for a specific journey. However, at some points there are one or more touch points that can significantly affect commuters, transforming not only their everyday experiences but also their sense of well-being. One participant (Informant 11), for example, described how his experience was transformed by a considerate driver: 'I remember there was one time, it was raining in Glasgow. I pressed the bell for the bus to stop, but there were road works at the place where the bus was supposed to stop. The next stop is far away. Because of the driver was very nice, he stopped at where I want even though it was not the stop for this number of the bus. He was very helpful and I was happy and grateful for the driver. It was a good experience for me'. When he was asked about how this particular experience affected his well-being, he said 'yes, it affected me. It gave me a good sign that most of the drivers are like that, so the next day when I wanted to take the bus, I was still feeling happy. Even it affected me at work, if he did not stop, I might feel frustrated because the weather was bad'. Another participant (Informant 8) told that 'it is not the best experience to travel at busy times' as she said 'if the bus is really busy, sometimes it gets a lot of students and they are all talking and it can become very noisy', thus to make the experience less affected, 'I listen to the radio and put my earphone on to avoid the noise

of other passengers', she said. When she was asked to what extent these passengers affected herself and her journey, she answered: 'It is quite difficult, because I suffer from a migraine, really quite a bad migraine, noises can really affect me and I am not a great traveller so I can feel quite sick sometimes. So, when I'm feeling like that it is not great'. These are examples of what halo effect can do to change a customer's perception of the overall experience because of specific touch points, and making the mundane experience as more transformative.

Conclusion: This study expands the general understanding of service experience and advances our knowledge about customer's well-being, by contributing a new theoretical insight of transformative service experience in everyday service settings. Apart from the theoretical contribution, the holistic examination of the customer journey informs practitioners and organisations of the importance of different touch points throughout the commuting journey, so that relevant managerial actions can be implemented to maximize customers' well-being.

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