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The Dimensions of Mystery Shopping Program (DMSP) - Checklist Construction

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to develop a checklist (yardstick) which can be used widely across various industries employing mystery shoppers. This research paper focuses on the development of a checklist instrument after a detailed critical review of various theories, concepts and themes associated with mystery shopping. Mystery shopping is being used in many industries such as banking and insurance, Retail and marketing, Government department, entertainment etc., and hence a common yardstick has to be framed which could be used to measure the outcome of mystery shopping assignments. Thus, the research motivation is to construct a checklist for mystery shoppers to evaluate the mystery shopping field work. Selected research articles were taken to critically analyze the theme of mystery shopping. Rigorous efforts had been taken to understand the usage of mystery shopping in various industries to form a common pool of statements which forms the "The Dimensions of Mystery Shopping Program" (DMSP-checklist construction). To ensure the relevance of a common checklist which can be used across various industries, detailed explanation on how the variables had been selected has been explained. Qualitative software named Dedoose, which is now very popular in Social Science, has been used to find the most promising variables. The study concludes that measuring the customers shopping experience is more important for a mystery shopping filed work considering three important variables to be seen in checklist such as: product knowledge, service & customer experience.

Keywords: Mystery shopping, Checklist construction, Customer experience, Customer service, customer satisfaction and loyalty, feedback.

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Introduction

Mystery shopping is getting famous in the competitive world after the firms and service stations have realized the importance of leadership (Bromage, 2000). In the age of Corporates, sustaining in the market as a leader is only a dream come true. Because of the cut-throat competition, firms have started to devise new strategies to satisfy their customers and the other stake holders.There is a lot of opportunities for marketing research agencies and firms which provide various services to the corporate houses. Though "mystery shopping" is a new marketing research tool it has been widely used and accepted in various industries. (S & Vidhyadhara, 2016), say that mystery shopping provides all the needed information's for various industries such as restaurants, spa and gym, churches and other religious institutions, retail stores and other dealership business etc (Finn, 2001). They have also mentioned that the marketing research agencies have started to recruit mystery shoppers to conduct various mystery shopping assignments. Mystery shopping concept is old as wine because in the olden days the Kings who had a control over the country used to appoint spy agents to know the reality. Kings used to take decisions based on the expectations of the community and to know what was happening mystery shoppers were used. In the recent times mystery shopping is used widely across the world in various sectors and is called using various terms such as: Hush-Hush shopping, Ghost Shopping, Spy Shopping, Silent Observation, Secret Shopping etc. During 1940's a bank, which experienced robbery, employed internal mystery shopping concept to find the culprit. Business has become more customers centred and every business aims to have a niche for itself. Hence, to streamline the services provided business houses and service providers have started to make the best use of marketing research agencies that provide ready mystery shopping services (Job monkey), (Zikmund, 2009), (Olwen, 2017), (Pappas, 2015), (Mystery shopper job finder), (Trend Source, 2017). (Dr R Angayarkanni, Anand Shankar Raja M, 2016), in their research article have mentioned, "Mystery shopping is a very simple concept which deals with silent observation and hence mystery shoppers take enormous efforts to complete each mystery shopping task. Mystery shopping has been popularly used and practices in the retail industry. Many researchers have conducted a silent observation in a private retail establishment identify various aspects such as store management, customer-storekeeper interaction, cleanliness, ambience etc. From the research works it was evident that, mystery shopper is a very useful tool to measure customer satisfaction and loyalty (Mallett, 2008), (week, 2008), (Gosselt J. F., 2007), (Singh, 2014 June). Mystery shopping is not seen only in the retail industry but it is even used for business administration and management. (Anand Shankar Raja M;, Dr R Angayarkanni, 2015), initiated a study on how mystery shopping is used in the office scenario for various purposes. According to this study, the researchers have stated that, mystery shopping is a tool, which is used across the world to streamline administration to scale success of pinnacles.Thus, it has to be understood that mystery shopping is not used only in the retail scenario but it is even used for an ordinary office management. Noticing the personality, attitude and other aspects associated with the behavioral aspect is an important component of a mystery shopping assignment. For example, in banking sector customer care and service delivery is a vital element and hence for other few domains such as restaurant, travels agencies etc (Jayaraman, 2010). Hence, one of the outcomes, which have to be measured, is "Human Behavior" (Verma, 2008), (Wiele, 2005 June), (Wilson A. M., 1998). Mystery shopping has been widely practices in various industries such as

Insurance, banking, retail, marketing, entertainment and service industry. Mystery shopping is a perfect tool to measure the service delivery. This tool is very useful to measure the performance of the service (Wilson, 1998), (A.M, 1998). There are certain business units and organizations, which use mystery shopping to evaluate the services across the country (Anderson, 2001). For example, the travel agencies, which provide travel service across the country at various destinations, use mystery shoppers to understand the various components because this method has the advantage of direct observation (Hudson & Snaith).Mystery shopping concept is old as wine because in the olden days the Kings who had a control over the country used to appoint spy agents to know the reality. Kings used to take decisions based on the expectations of the community and to know what was happening mystery shoppers were used. In the recent times mystery shopping is used widely across the world in various sectors and is called using various terms such as: Hush-Hush shopping, Ghost Shopping, Spy Shopping, Silent Observation, Secret Shopping etc. During 1940's a bank, which experienced robbery, employed internal mystery shopping concept to find the culprit. Business has become more customers centered and every business aims to have a niche for itself. Hence, to streamline the services provided business houses and service providers have started to make the best use of marketing research agencies that provide ready mystery shopping services.

Customer service and experience

Customer service has become important that a few even argue that it is a business survival strategy (Erlich, 2007). The consumers expect Service excellence because they pay a huge amount to consume a service and hence they expect the value derived out of the consumption to be more than the amount paid for it. Moreover these services has to be rendered with care and keenness because "Customers don't care what you know until they know what you care" (Spitzer, 2005). Taking into consideration the most used and recognized variables on customer service given by Parusuraman and Zeithaml such as Reliability (CS1), Tangibles (CS2), Responsiveness (CS3), Assurance (CS4), and Empathy (CS5) the customer service outcome can be measured by the mystery shoppers (Parasuraman & Zeithaml, 1998). An article published by (Hyat), stated that mystery shopping is used to measure the quality of services which are being provided by the business firms to the consumers. The article has an explanation on a diagrammatic model incorporated with variables associated with customer services. This conceptual model has variables which can be used to measure and improve the customer services such as: Evaluation of training programs, gaining customer perspectives, identification of loopholes and understanding customer service touch points. The research work also states that mystery shopping is very useful to find the customer experiences. Thus customer experiences, customer services are very closely associated. Stella Services which was incorporated during the year 2010 with a vision "to create a world with better services" has stated some important key variables under the heading "How Mystery Shopping Companies Improve The Customer Experience". The key criteria stated in this article are: Using feedback, mystery shopping to check compliance, gaining insights on mystery shopping. The battleground of the business can be won by building customer loyalty. Loyalty is the personal emotional attachment, which a customer has with a brand, product, service etc. This is a never-ending debate in the business world says (Shepherd, 2004). Customer attains loyalty when he has a good experience with the product or the service

and hence it is important to understand the customer experience. The seven great philosophies of customer experience have been listed by (Shaw & Ivens, 2002). According to Shaw and Ivens, the seven philosophies used to build great customer experiences are greeting the customers, focusing on their emotions, empowering culture, keeping customers happy as it has an influence on the brand, concentrating on revenue and profitability position through customer experience and enabling customer experience through inspiration and leadership quality. Since it is a Universal truth that in order to sustain Lasting Customer Loyalty (LCL), the business and service units have to deliver Total Customer Experience (Oswald, Ram, & Michael, 2006). According to the Total Customer Experience the researchers have identified few important key variables such as: physical moments, emotional involvement moments, and its value chain moments.

Concept of mystery shopping in various industries

(Olufemi, Olusegun, & Tolulope, 2015), conducted a research in the banking sector to explore the service quality in the Nigerian Banks. They collected data through a survey questionnaire and the results of the study states that, mystery shopping has a very significant impact on maintenance of the quality standards. With regard to the question statements, the researchers have framed few important aspects to measure the service quality. Thus condensing the question statements the variable found are: Employees awareness on mystery shopping, Mystery shopping might create anxiety amongst the employees, Mystery shopping for performance evaluation, Maintenance of discipline, Motivation for the employees, Identification of training needs. One of the articles published in a website stated that, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) uses mystery shopping to assess the internal quality and conduct of the banks across the country. Raghu Ram Rajan the ex-RBI Governor, at the annual conference of the banking ombudsmen at Thiruvananthapuram, said the grievance redressed mechanism must be integrated in the business operations of banks and mystery shopping is used to find the mis-leading products (Bhaskaran, 2016). (CGAP), Conducted a research on mystery shopping for financial services and have categorized a few variables after mystery shopping visit. According to this thesis the important variables are associated with:Product and service information, physical materials, sales experience and consumer perceptions, incorrect disclosure of the information, poor sales staff knowledge on products and service related to financial services, various terms and conditions which falls under incorrect disclosure. Thus these variables have been selected for the financial services. These variables are common for all financial institutions.Mystery shopping is very famous in retail domain for example, (Low, 2011), conducted a research on how mystery shopping is used in the retail sector. The main aim of the study was to find the contribution of mystery shopping in the service excellence journey. Some of the key factors observed in this research are: Staff grooming, store environment, Merchandise display, Staff attitude, Ability and willingness to guide, Product knowledge and Point of Purchase Service. (Anand, Sruti, 2015), has framed a conceptual model to understand the process of mystery shopping and the work pattern. Since the objective of the paper was to explore mystery shopping is useful for the organized retailers, the researcher has identified certain variables from the past research work following the descriptive research style. The variables highlighted by Shruti Anand (2015), are: Employee integrity, customers purchase decision, provision to understand customer complaint, feedback and voice of the customer, demand and desires of customers. The same type of research has been conducted in many retail outlets such

as alcohol stores, kiosk, super markets, hyper markets and established retail mall (Gosselt, 2007), (TCS, 2013). Mystery shopping usage has now become famous in the healthcare industry where it is being actively employed in medical institutions, hospitals, primary healthcare centers etc. (Helen Moriarty, Deborah McLeod, Anthony Dowell, 2003), conducted a research to check how mystery shopping has evolved in the health industry. For the purpose of data collection a telephonic interview had been conducted to silently observe and document the same. The research concluded that, patient safety and satisfaction can be accessed through mystery shopping. Cleanliness and the behavior of the doctor, receptionist and other staff working in the hospitals can also be measured through mystery shopping (Sandra G. Boodman, 2010). A research work titled "Mystery patients or simulated patients: A check on the Medical Professionals" has stated a few areas which can be identified using mystery shopping. The key parameters are: information being provided to the patient, staff care on regular basis, investigations in the laboratory and clinical quality issues (Jaswinder Kaur, M.S. Bhatia, Priyanka Gautam, Rashmita Saha, 2015).

Table 1. Research methodology

Type of Research	Qualitative approach
Source of data collection	Secondary source from past Literature reviews
Study Scope	Scope is limited to mystery shopping
Significance of the study	Development of a checklist which can be used by mystery shoppers and market research agencies
Tools used for analysis/Software	Dedoose (Qualitative software), Code concurrence and 3D Packed cloud

Applications of qualitative methodology for mystery shopping attributes

In various roles of research, especially in Social science research the main goal is to conceptualize various dimensions through qualitative methods. Every variables associated with mystery shopping cannot be counted and everything which that counts can be counted. Certain phenomena have to be contemplated in a social science research. Thus, mystery shopping and all the related variables are behavior associated which observes store cleanliness, customer behavior, staff behavior, interaction and communication etc. These are the critical elements of mystery shopping and researchers have to use strategic process to break-down, understand, and collect information and also to interpret it for generating a conceptual understanding. In this research there is no space for investigation and hence no quantitative tools have been used. The various subjective concerns related to mystery shopping have been considered through existing articles (selected articles for a content analysis). In order to perform the content analysis it is important for a researcher to go through the literature reviews to understand the various themes being discussed by various researchers. A couple of good articles are available on "mystery shopping" spread across various industries which have been selected for the content analysis. Dedoose qualitative software is popularly being used in social science research. Thus care has been taken in choosing the computer software for data coding (Barry, 1998), (Bong, 2002), (Davidson, 2012). Qualitative data has to be given priority

the structure of the article has to be described in common language without technicalities (Bryman, 1998), (Bryman, 2006), (Elliott, 2005), (Tashakkori, 1998).

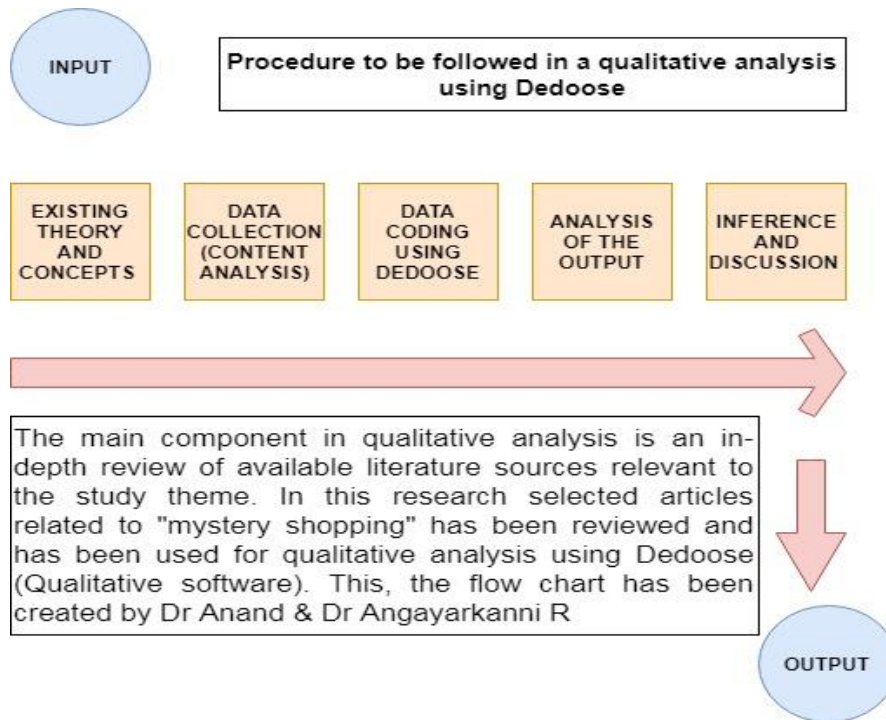### Steps used in qualitative methodology (dedoose)

Figure 1. Qualitative methodology steps

Checklist construction methodology: an overview

The research work begins with the efforts taken for "item generation" which depends on strong theoretical work on mystery shopping concept. The mixture of various items holds various behaviors which have to be assessed to keep the items consistent with the concept (McLaughlin & Harrison,, 1991), (Hinkin, Bruce, & Cathy, 1997). A detailed explanation has been given on how inductive and deductive approach has added value to this research for the construction of the scale to measure mystery shopping outcome. Since the research depends on extensive literature work pertaining to the concept of mystery shopping in various domains, a deductive approach has been used. The researcher has selected variables using qualitative software called "Dedoose" and hence certain qualitative information has been taken using a focus group interview and discussion with marketing research firms it follows an inductive approach. Thus, this research work has identified variables after a serious effort. The best practices to be followed for a scale development has been mentioned on a chronological process to get more clarity on every aspect associated with the scale development process (Wright & Campbell Quick, 2017). Since, theoretical and methodological rigor is essential for a scale development process; this research involves systematic and complex procedures which have been followed on a step by step sequence (Nunnally, 1967).

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Variable matrix using dedoose a qualitative software (variable count)

Table 2. Mystery shopping Checklist variables

Variables	Count
Greetings to the customers	1
Following the instructions of the store manager	1
Responding to the queries of the customer	2
Shopping-experience	5
Special-request being fulfilled	0
Voice-tone and politeness	3
Arranged window display and pleasing appearance	1
Attentiveness of the staff in the store	2
Availability of the products	2
CRM (Relationship maintainance)	2
Clean and neat ambiance	2
Collects customer feedback	2
Commitment in the work	3
Courteousness	1
Customer centric approach	1
Customer satisfaction	3
Customer-delight	1
Dealing rough customers	1
Employee knowledge about the products/service	1
Employee communication	1
Employee looks and appearance	1
Employees interest in searching	1
Employees seeking feedback	1
Employees understanding customer's emotions	2
Focus on customer requirements	2
Friendliness	2
Handling tough situation	1
Helpful behavior	1
Honest, truthful, ethical	1
Knowledge	3
Loyalty	3
Phone call kept on hold (time)	2
Product advice	1
Product categories	1
Product information	5
Professional manners	2
Prominent in service	3
Prompt reply	2

Promptness in attending call	1
Qualified store manager	1
Quality standards	1
Quality-service	1
Receptionist welcome	1
Service	5
Service excellence	2
Spacing capacity of the store	1
Speak polite	1
Staff neatness in dressing	1
Store administration capacity	2
Store opening and closing hours	1
Stores outside look	2
Thanking every customer	1
Value chain moments	1
Visual-appeal	0
Website of the retail brand/store	1
Welcoming environment	1
Well-organized store and function	1
Work-environment	1
Customer interaction	1
Timely-service	1

Inference from the above chart (variable count)

It is understood that, past research work, articles, website information, audio and video visuals have been considered to collect data on the most relevant items to be seen in the mystery shopper's checklist. These items have been mentioned in most of the articles and hence the count is more for certain variables. This checklist can be used by the future researchers, Market Research agencies, Mystery shopper's association, and mystery shoppers (internal and external) to conduct the best mystery shopping field work. All the variables listed in the above matrix are common for all the fields and hence these checklist items can be used widely. Consumers become loyal to the brand if the service provides is fulfilling as per the expectations and they get involved in repeat purchase. This is a very true representation from the literature reviews a many researchers who have conducted research on mystery shopping have mentioned the same. The money spent for the product or service should be worth and hence customers seek a lot of information about the product before engaging themselves with the purchase decision. The duty of the seller is to provide the needed information on time as per the customer's demand. Thus, product information becomes an important item in the checklist. Well maintained store with delightful ambiance and knowledgeable sales representatives creates a positive shopping experience for a customer. Thus, shopping experience occupies the third most important position in the checklist.
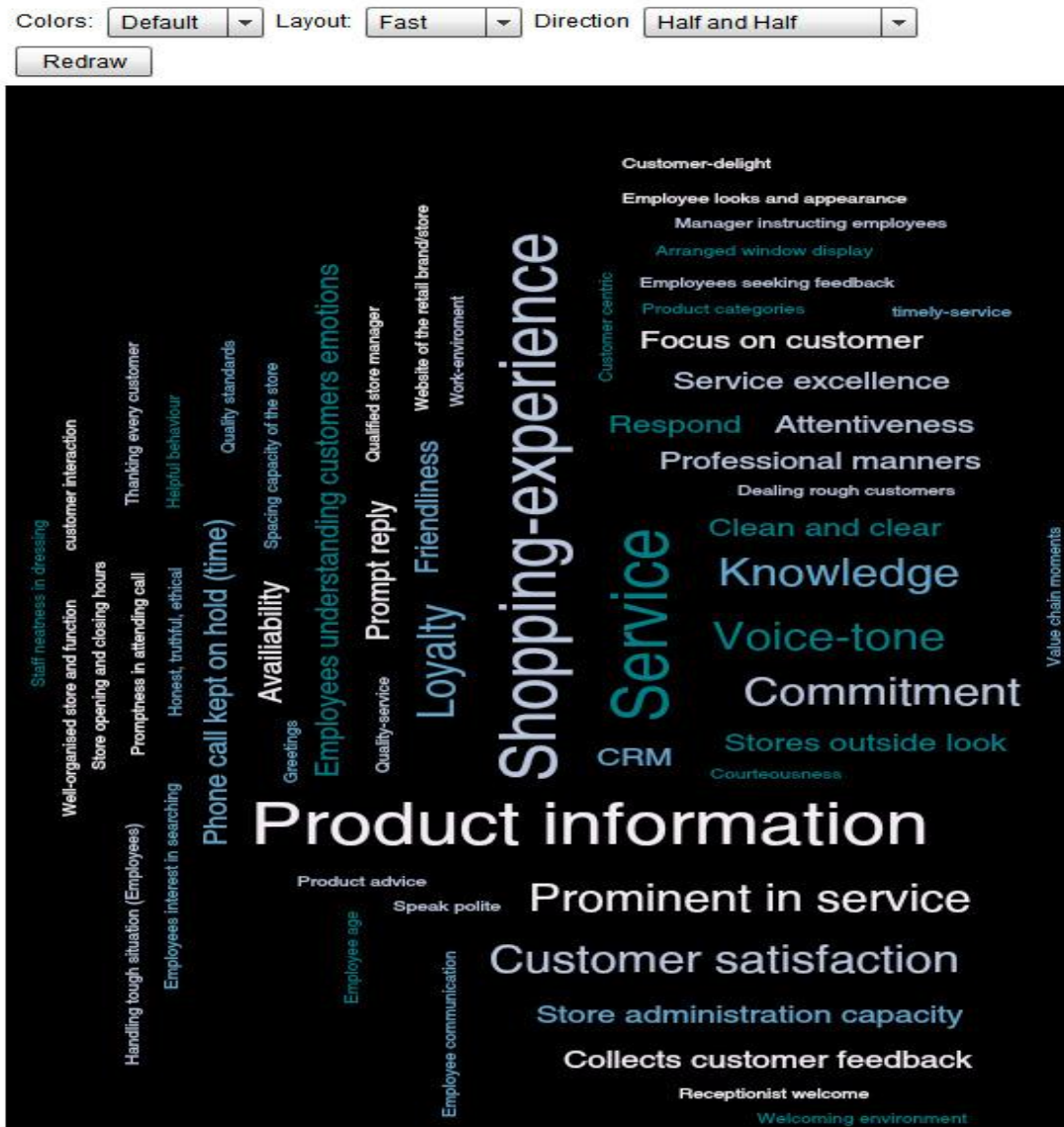
Figure 2. Showing the 3D Packed cloud; An output gendrated using Dedoose

Inference for the above chart (3d packed cloud using dedoose a qualitative output)

From the above visual representation (3D Packed Cloud) it is clear that, through there are many items in the mystery shopping checklist the most important variables are: Product information, Shopping experience, Customer satisfaction, Knowledge and commitment. These variables have been repeatedly used in many research papers by most of the researchers. Shopping experience plays an important role because it increases the firms value. The efforts taken by the marketer is regained though (ROI) if he satisfies the customer and hence good shopping experience leads to customer satisfaction. Customer Satisfaction is also influence by other variables as listed above such as product information and knowledge given by the store keeper or the sales representatives and in influencing the customers to get involved in the purchase action.

Conclusion

The modern tool to measure customer's shopping experience is mystery shopping and is now popularly used in many industries across the world. Market research agencies should bring in more uniformity by taking serious measures to find out the most desirable check-list items for a mystery shopping field work. Thus, certain aspects such as customer experience, knowledge about the product, customer satisfaction, Professional manners, and quality in service should be strictly cross checked during the time of the field work. Considering the most important factors as listed in the checklist matrix, the market research agencies and mystery shoppers can enhance their mystery shopping filed work. Mystery shopping should not be treated just as a freelancing job, it should be executed with passion and commitment in measuring the most important factors needed for the business success. Thus, this checklist construction will be useful for the measuring business success in terms of Customer satisfaction, Loyalty and experience.

Suggestions

➢ The checklist developed in this research (Dimensions of Mystery Shopping Program-A checklist construction), can be employed by the market research agencies and mystery shoppers.

➢ Various market research agencies can also think in developing new checklist constructions based on the market trend and expectations.

➢ Mystery shoppers before finalizing the mystery shopping assignment can take the checklist for cross-verification.

➢ Many scale for measuring Customer Satisfaction (CS), Customer Loyalty (CL), Customer Experience (CX) is available across the world by the efforts by many researchers, but development of scale for the purpose of mystery shopping should be a new initiative.

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These dimensions of mystery shopping (checklist) is recommended for public use. this checklist has been developed by dr. anand shankar raja m and the researcher can be reached at anand.shankar@christuniversity.in

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