Towards the Identification of Customer Experience Touch Point Elements

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors identify the elements that encompass customer experience touch points. This research was based on a qualitative research approach, using a sequential incident technique to guide the data collection. An inductive thematic analysis of the semi-structure interview transcripts, collected from customer narratives of experiences with retailers, was employed to identify distinct elements of customer experience touch points. The findings uncovered seven distinct elements of customer experience touch points, which include; atmospheric, technological, communicative, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction and product interaction elements. The findings highlight that multichannel retail touch points are made up of varying combinations of the identified elements. The study offers a comprehensive understanding of customer experience; one that will help retailers to orchestrate the customer experience at individual touch points.

1. Introduction

In today's marketplace, customer experience is generally acknowledged by retailers as an important component in sustaining a competitive advantage. Customers now have more power than ever and a variety of means whereby it can be exercised. The upsurge of online review websites, social networks and mobile web access have enabled customers to know more than sellers about products, services, competitors and pricing. Amid all of this, there is a proliferation of products and services and increasing competition in the market place. Customers desire more than just the production, delivery and consumption of products and services; instead, they seek unique and memorable experiences that accompany the delivery of products and services (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

Customer experience is widely recognized as the internal and subjective response customers have to any interaction with a company (Lemke, Clark, and Wilson 2011; Meyer and Schwager 2007; Pine and Gilmore 1999; Verhoef et al. 2009; Zomerdijk and Voss 2010). The subjective nature of the experience is elucidated by Pine and Gilmore (1998, p. 99) who indicate that "experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level". Several authors argue that customer experience is shaped not only by the aspects which firms can control (e.g., service interface, store displays and advertising), but also by factors that are outside of the firm's control (e.g., customer interactions and purpose of shopping) (Meyer and Schwager 2007; Verhoef et al. 2009). This is because experiences are constructed by customers' interpretations of encounters (Hume et al. 2006), meaning that experiences cannot be completely controlled by the company. Rather than creating experiences, companies can design and orchestrate prerequisites and stimuli that enable customers to have the desired experiences (Gupta and Vajic 2000).

Customers have experiences every time they 'touch' any part of the product, service, brand or organization, across multiple channels and at various points in time (Pantano and Viassone 2015; Zomerdijk and Voss 2010). Such moments of truth between the customer and any part of the company are known as 'touch points'. The journey that a customer takes to achieve a certain shopping task (e.g., search for information, purchase a product), therefore, is formed by a series of touch points. To date, research relating to customer experience has considered customer experience predominantly as an overall evaluation based on an accumulation of experiences (e.g., Rose et al. 2012). Such consideration, however, restricts the understanding of the key moments of truth between the customer and the retailer. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the customer experience literature by identifying, categorizing and defining the distinct elements that occur during customer experiences at different touch points. A comprehensive understanding of customer experience touch points will enable deeper insight into the distinct components that shape customer experience at different touch points.

2. Customer experience touch points

Customer experience develops throughout all touch points and episodes encountered during the service delivery process (Jüttner et al. 2013; Frow and Payne 2007). These touch points may exist pre- and post-purchase (e.g., Meyer and Schwager 2007; Zomerdijk and Voss 2010; Tynan and McKechnie 2009) and occur in different retail channels (Martin, Mortimer and Andrews 2015; Verhoef et al. 2009). Meyer and Schwager (2007) point out that touch points may not be linked necessarily or directly to a company, suggesting that indirect interactions also emerge during unplanned encounters with representatives of a company's products, service or brands (e.g., recommendation or criticism conversations, news reports,

reviews etc.). From this perspective, touch points occur at all stages of the customer journey including the search, evaluation, purchase and after-sale phases of the experience (Verhoef et al. 2009). Past studies that have examined customer responses during particular episodes or events have relied predominantly on using cues, stimuli and service encounters (Baker et al. 2002; Bitner 1992; Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; Brocato, Voorhees, and Baker 2012; Jüttner et al. 2013; Rose et al. 2012). Whereas cues, stimuli and service encounters reflect something that a company orchestrates for the customer, touch points represent what actually happens from the customer's perspective (Zomerdijk and Voss 2010). Thus, an in-depth understanding of customer experience touch points can only be comprehended through a subjective customer perspective (Lemke, Clark, and Wilson 2011).

3. Research Methods

Investigating customer experience touch points requires rich insights into the specific elements that form the distinct 'moment of truth' interactions. A qualitative research approach, using a sequential incident technique, was employed to build a complex and holistic understanding of a situation (i.e., touch point) through an in-depth analysis of recalled accounts of customer experiences from informants.

3.1 Sequential incident technique

The sequential incident technique is a qualitative interviewing technique that is process-oriented and facilitates the collection of incidents perceived by customers during the service delivery process (Stauss and Weinlich 1997). The approach is based on the critical incident technique (Gremler 2004), which is a qualitative interview procedure that "facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes, or issues) identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects"

(Chell and Pittaway 1998, p. 56). The sequential incident technique adopts the 'incident telling' concept of critical incident technique, while also considering the normal, uncritical incidents that may take place during an event (Jüttner et al. 2013). The benefit of using such a technique is that it enables researchers to focus on a very specific phenomenon by defining the specific aim of the study which, in turn, helps to identify important thematic details and examples to support the findings (Gremler 2004). These techniques employ a story telling approach, which enables informants to use their own words when describing and evaluating all events they recall from the particular retail encounter.

Using the sequential incident technique, informants were guided on the basis of a visualized customer path through all episodes (touch points) that customers typically follow during the customer journey (see Figure 1). Within each episode (touch point) the informants were asked to report any incidents they remember and describe them as precisely as possible (Jüttner et al. 2013). For the purpose of this study, the sequential incident technique was used to elicit the descriptions of the touch points encountered by customers in the course of their customer journey. The sequential incident technique was adopted to capture the dynamic, procedural nature of the customer experience, which is subjective and perceptual to the individual customer.

Figure 1: Application of the sequential incident technique to touch point research
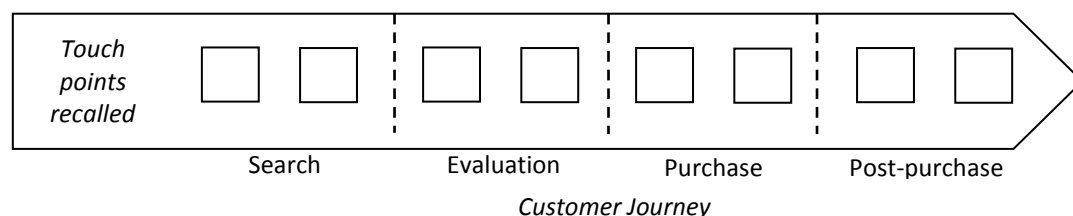
3.2 Research Process

Prior to the commencement of the study, a review of extant literature relating to 'experiential marketing' in general, and 'customer experience' in particular was conducted to understand the phenomena of customer experience. Subsequently, a set of effective research questions was created for interviews by following the recommendations of McNamara (2009). We ensured that: (i) the questions were worded clearly, (ii) the wording was open-ended (Gall, Gall, and Borg, 2003) to enable respondents to choose their own terms when answering questions and thus allow them to contribute as much detailed information as they desire, and (iii) the questions were as neutral as possible to avoid wording that might influence answers. The questions allowed the interviewer to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up to dig deep into the customer experiences and related knowledge of the participants in order to gain maximum data from the interviews.

As suggested by Kvale (2007) we sought expert opinion from marketing academics to assess the wording and flow of the semi-structured interview questions. The interview questions were pre-tested with a small number of informants to evaluate whether the wording and flow of questions made sense to the informants. This process helped us to determine if there are flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview design and thus allowed us to make necessary revisions prior to the implementation of the study. The pre-tests were conducted with participants that have similar interests as those that will participate in the implemented study. Based on the results of the pre-tests we refined the research questions. To prevent possible contamination of the extracted data (Colgate et al. 2007), we avoided using any specific marketing literature terminology or jargon (e.g., touch points, customer journey etc.) during the interviews. The informants for the study were screened prior to the

interview to ensure that they were suitable for the research; e.g., that they had recent retailer/service provider experiences.

Finally, as suggested by Creswell (2007) we had prolonged engagement and persistent observations in the field to have as many interviews and discussion with the participants as we could, and performed respondent validation of preliminary findings by seeking feedback from the research participants to ensure validity of the research findings.

3.3 Selection of sample informants

To unearth the distinct elements that encompass customer experience touch points in a retail context, several retail industries were explored. This approach enabled data collection from varying industries that offer their products or services through several retail channel formats (e.g., in-store, online, mobile app) and provided a representation of a wide array of customer experiences (Konus, Verhoef, and Neslin 2008). A critical aspect of the current research is that the informant (i.e., customer) can recall the distinct incidences (touch points) across the customer journey and provide a descriptive account of these incidences. To ensure that the informants represented varying age groups and gender, we employed purposive sampling method (Miles and Huberman 1994).

3.4 Data Collection

At the start of the interview, informants were asked to think about a recent experience they had with a retailer of their choice. Next the informants were requested to name the retailer and present a brief description of their experience. This was aimed at providing the informants with comfort and freedom to describe their experience with ease (Arksey and Knight 1999). In addition, the informants were asked what they were trying to achieve during

the experience (i.e., to make a purchase, search for information, browse etc.) and how much familiarity they had with the particular retailer/service industry to provide further context to the experience.Subsequently , in line with sequential incident technique research, the informants were asked to recall and describe any incidents that they remembered. In accordance with the conceptualization of customer experience touch points, the incidents need not necessarily be related to critical incidents and could comprise any distinct interaction that the customer is able to recall. During the interview, the informants were probed for further insights into the incidents they encountered at each stage of the customer journey.

A total of 34 customer experience narratives were revealed from 28 semi-structured interviews. Some of the informants reported multiple experiences with different retailers during the interview. The research process was terminated after the 28th semi-structured interview as the interviews conducted thus far generated information saturation (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). The thematic analysis of the 34 customer experience narratives revealed repetitive themes, which lent support for the information saturation decision when themes converged (Eisenhardt 1989). A cross-case analysis of the repetitive themes revealed that no new themes arrived after the 25th interview. Yet, it was decided to conduct additional semi-structured interviews in order to ensure that no further themes were revealed. The average duration of the interviews was approximately 45 minutes. The demographic profile of the informants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample informants

No.	Gender	Age	Occupation	Retailer	Retail Channel
1	Female	26	Designer	Hotel,	In-store/Online
				Travel agency	Online
2	Male	48	Business manager	Hardware store	In-store
3	Female	51	Homemaker	Book store	Online
4	Male	47	Teacher	Electronics store	Online
5	Male	39	Social worker	Fashion apparel retailer	In-store
6	Female	49	Finance officer	Café	In-store
7	Female	22	Human resources	Fashion apparel retailer,	In-store/Online
				Restaurant	In-store
8	Female	30	Accountant	Department store	In-store
9	Male	36	Information technology	Electronics store	In-store
10	Female	49	Administrator	Department store	Online/Mobile App
11	Female	28	Human resources	Fashion apparel retailer	In-store/Online
12	Female	33	Human resources	Café	In-store
13	Female	19	Apprentice	Fashion apparel retailer	Online
14	Male	42	School teacher	Airline	In-store/Online
15	Female	21	Retail shop assistant	Café,	In-store
				Fashion apparel retailer	Online
16	Male	38	Builder	Health club	In-store
17	Male	54	Business manager	Bank,	Mobile App
				Gift store	In-store
18	Female	52	Homemaker	Supermarket	In-store
19	Female	26	Financial consultant	Hairdresser,	In-store
				Department store	Online
20	Male	41	Small business owner	Telecommunications	Online
21	Female	62	Retired	Restaurant	In-store
22	Male	23	Student	Bar,	In-store
				Supermarket	In-store
23	Male	37	Medical practitioner	Airline	In-store/Online
24	Male	42	Construction worker	Bank	In-store
25	Female	38	Dentist	Café	In-store
26	Male	48	Truck driver	Fast food	In-store
27	Male	27	Public service officer	Travel agency	Online
28	Female	32	Hairdresser	Beauty retailer	In-store

3.5 Data Analysis

Given that this study was conducted to identify the distinct elements of customer experience touch points through qualitative data, we used an inductive process to work from the words of

each participant's responses to identify and code themes related to the specific elements of customer experience touch points. The data obtained from the qualitative interviews were analyzed thematically using NVivo. The emerged themes were reviewed through a cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994) to identify the frequency of repeated themes across informants. Following the refinement and scope of each of the themes, definitions and titles for each theme were generated. The titles of the identified themes were driven by the existing literature as well as derived from the data. The themes, their respective codes and sample extracts are presented in Table 2, while the definition of each theme is presented in Table 3.

Table 2: Themes and codes from the thematic analysis

Theme	Code	Example
Atmospheric elements	Amenities	"My gym has these quiet rest areas with lounges and sofa, which is a great place to go to and chill after doing a long workout."
	Ambience	"It's always quite busy, which is good. The bar has a pretty good feel from the dim lights and pumping music."
	Store attractiveness	"It's always a great place to shop at, I always safe as well and it's reasonably tidy at all times during the year, especially the clothing area because a lot of people dump things all over the place."
	Store layout and design	"Zara [fashion apparel retailer] has this fantastic store design, the shop is really attractive so the moment you enter Zara it gives you a feeling of high-end fashion but is yet affordable."
	Store display	"The way they display the shoes is great. They show a wide range of products, styles and colors on the shelves in a really stunning area, and there's always a lot to choose from."
Technological elements	Technology - ease of use	"I bought it from the store because it's so easy to do. It's really user friendly, their payment methods are really secure I don't have to worry all the fraud and all of that."
	Technology - convenience	"I usually buy my books online because it is way more convenient than going to the book store and have to wait in lines and all of that."
	Self-service technology	"I used the self-service kiosk at the Virgin [airline] terminal to check-in my family's flights. It was easy to use and I could even select our seats on the touch screen."
Communicative elements	Promotional message	"I got an email from hardtofind.com.au [gift store] that said that they've got 10% off storewide until midnight."
	Informative message	"It had lots of information on the [hotel] website that I guess made us feel more comfortable about booking the hotel online."
	Advertisement	"I always see ads on TV for Myer [department store]. Last night I was watching TV and saw a Myer commercial that said that the midseason sale is on now."
Process elements	Waiting time	"We had to wait at least about fifteen minutes for someone to come and take an order and when they did they went away and then we had to wait for another half an hour to receive our coffee."
	Navigation	"It's quite easy to find things in the store, regardless of which location you go to, they all are set out the same. So it's always user friendly in relation to finding things where they're situated."
	Service	"The returns process was just too complicated. I also think that the slow

	process	delivery or poorly estimated delivery time put me off as well, which made me think that it would take like another month for me to receive the correct size."
Employee-customer interaction elements	Helpful employee	"When I was coming back from New Zealand at Auckland airport, the airline employee who gave me the boarding pass was so helpful."
	Personalized service	"The chef actually coming out personally and asking how we enjoyed the meal and explained how he made some of the creations because it was vegan food, which is something that we weren't really used to."
	Friendly greeting	"I walked into Bunnings [hardware store] and they have quite a good meet and greet person who basically welcomes you to the store."
	Argumentative employee	"The staff member was arguing with me about returning a $7 item. I felt extremely frustrated and it became quite insulting that I would lie over a few dollars where obviously the error was made by the store."
Customer-customer interaction elements	Customer reviews	"When I read so many positive comments about the store it definitely put me at ease, making me much more confident to shop with them."
	Word-of-mouth	"I heard some good things about it from my friends who said it is quite quirky, which I'm totally in to, so I thought I'd give it a try."
	Direct customer interactions	"I spoke to my friend about how the bikinis fit and what size she got so that made me more comfortable knowing what size to choose when I bought my bikinis online."
	Indirect customer interactions	"When I was waiting in the line to pay for my items at the checkout there were a lot of kids running and screaming around me, and it was so annoying."
Product interaction elements	Product quality	"The quality of the bikini was great it was what I expected. It came in a great pouch made of the material of the bikini, which was cool."
	Product assortment	"I always find Myer [department store] a great place to shop because they have a good variety of products whether electrical, clothing, shoes, handbags, or cosmetics."
	Direct product interactions	"The product itself in terms of food and coffee was really nice, I would definitely go back there for the food."
	Indirect product interactions	"I first saw the laptop that I wanted to buy in the JB Hifi [electronics store] catalog that was delivered in the mail to my house. I knew that the laptop was perfect for me straight after I saw it."

Table 3: Definitions of the touch point elements

Touch point elements	Definition
Atmospheric	The physical characteristics and surrounding customers observe when interacting with any part of the retailer.
Technological	A customer's direct interaction with any form of technology during an encounter with a retailer.
Communicative	One-way communication from the retailer to the customer, including both promotional and informative messages.
Process	The actions or steps customers need to take in order to achieve a particular outcome with a retailer.
Employee-customer interaction	The direct and indirect interactions customers have with employees when interacting with any part of the retailer.
Customer-customer interaction	The direct and indirect interactions customers have with other customers when interacting with any part of the retailer.
Product interaction	The direct or indirect interactions customers have with the core tangible or intangible product offered by the retailer.

4. Results

The results from the qualitative thematic analysis are presented below. The analysis reveals seven distinct themes relating to the elements of customer experience touch points, including: atmospheric, technological, communicative, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction and product interaction elements.

4.1 Atmospheric elements

The thematic analysis highlights various atmospheric elements at different touch points, which occur in different retail channels and across all stages of the customer journey. For instance, when evaluating whether to book a hotel, an informant viewed the hotel's website, commenting on certain design elements:

> *Their* _website looked quite good_ *and from there they had like a kind of* _3D walk through of the hotel_ *and it was just yeah, really* _well presented_*, gave us the imaging of the room, what the room would look like, and just like the general ground map and stuff like that.*
>
> *[Informant No. 1, Female]*

Another informant described a department store's mobile application design and aesthetics during the narration of her experience with the department store:

> *I love using the Target* [department store] *mobile app. Its very user friendly and I can* _easily find what I am looking for_ *using the search page.* _The colors and design on the app are bold, bright and large_ *making it easy for me to see when I am looking for things.*
>
> *[Informant No. 10, Female]*

Both of the above extracts provide examples of atmospherics in digital retail channels. The atmospherics in physical in-store environments also play a significant role during the touch point experience. For instance:

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Going to my hairdresser always puts me in a good mood. You know they <u>light candles</u> <u>and have the latest music playing and have all these large paintings on the walls,</u> <u>which really creates a good vibe</u>… The hairdressers all dress in the latest fashion and keep up to date with the latest hair trends... I tend go to my hairdresser mostly for, yeah, really the cool vibe rather than for the hair service.

[Informant No. 28, Female]

In the above extract, the informant states that the atmospherics such as the sensory factors (candles and music) and visual aspects (paintings and hairdresser look) is a very important component in her experience. Sometimes atmospherics may also feature in an experience, but may not be very important to a customer. For example:

I don't really care too much about how <u>pretty the displays look</u> or how friendly the service is, as long as I can get in and out of IGA [Supermarket] *quickly and can find everything, then I'm happy.*

[Informant No. 22, Male]

In this case, the store atmospherics are evident during the experience at the touch point; however, given the utilitarian shopping motivation of the customer, the atmospheric aspects, other than the store layout, does not appear to have a large affect on the customer's evaluation of the retailer. While the majority of informants discussed atmospherics in the search, evaluation and purchase stages of the customer journey, atmospherics were also considered during post-purchase touch points. For instance:

When I received my new dress [online purchase] *in the mail I was so excited. I cut open the parcel and found a <u>beautiful box with the store's logo</u> on it. The box was really nice - it opened upwards with a magnetic clasp ... I was not expecting this. Inside the box my new dress was wrapped in pink tissue paper and there was a note handwritten from the store addressed to me that thanked me for shopping here and hoped that I enjoy the dress ... They also put a $50 off voucher in the box. I couldn't believe how much <u>detail they put into the design and packaging</u>, it's amazing. Yeah like I'm definitely going to use the voucher soon.*

[Informant No. 7, Female]

From the above extracts, it is clear that customers encounter various atmospheric elements during different stages of the customer journey and in different retail channels. Atmospheric elements cover the physical characteristics and surrounding that customers observe when interacting with any part of the retailer. The interviews highlight that in physical channels, atmospheric aspects such as the layout, colors, lighting, music and scents provide visual and sensory stimuli that customers use to interpret the situation. While in digital settings, atmospheric aspects include the colors, graphics, music, layout and design of the website or technological interface.

4.2 Technological elements

Technological elements appear to be playing an important role during customers' encounters with a retailer, as is evident from an informant who indicated that she now purchases books from an online website instead of going into a physical store:

> *I used to like going into bookstores and browsing, but now <u>I find it easier to go online</u>. I like to shop online at the Book Depository* [book store]*, it's an online site and they've made it very <u>user friendly to operate their website</u> and it's an absolute pleasure to order a book from them.*
>
> *[Informant No. 3, Female]*

She continues,

> *I've purchased numerous books from them and most of my books I purchase take just a few days to be delivered. If they don't have the book I'm looking for they will either request another site or they will pre-order it for me and as soon as it arrives they will send it ... It's <u>very easy to use</u> and as they have all my details there's not much else I have to do other than <u>press purchase</u> ... It's very easy and so <u>convenient for me</u>.*
>
> *[Informant No. 3, Female]*

Another informant described how technology (website) helped him to pay for his mobile phone bill:

I just went to the <u>Optus</u> [telecommunications provider] <u>website</u>, logged into my account and clicked on the 'my bill' tab. This directed me straight to my latest bill and had a breakdown of all my charges. Usually there are never any issues with my bills; they are always the same price, which is good. From here, I clicked on 'pay my bill' and my credit card details are saved so all I have to do is click 'pay'. It's as easy as that <u>... I used to have to wait for my bill in the mail and take it to the post office but now I can pay for it in literally 2 minutes</u>.

[Informant No. 20, Male]

The above extracts emphasize how technology (website) facilitated the transactions in an 'easy' and 'convenient' manner. In both the online examples illustrated above, technology is a core component of the touch point. In addition to online channels, in physical environments customers are increasingly using technology, such as point-of-sale terminals, tablets and kiosks in their day-to-day transactions (Fowler and Bridges 2010; Giebelhausen et al. 2014). The data from the semi-structured interviews highlight that customers use technology in physical retail and service settings:

I go to a 24-hour gym and I usually go at odd hours so when I get there a lot of the time it's <u>not manned</u>. To get in all I have to do is <u>swipe my access card and the door will open</u> ... They have cameras there so they know if you bring anyone else in with you, which could get you a fine ... I've never had any issues getting into the gym.

[Informant No. 16, Male]

Another informant described how she used self-service technology to pay for her groceries at the supermarket:

I only had about six items in my basket and didn't want to wait in the long line so I <u>used the self-service checkout</u> at Coles [supermarket]. I usually go to the staffed checkout, but because I only had a few things I thought I'd give it a try ... At first it wasn't too bad, all I had to do was scan the items and place it in the bagging area. But when I went to do the two lemons I had, I had to fumble around because there was no barcode. When I finally worked out that I had to search for the lemons on the touch screen <u>the weigher didn't work</u>. I think it's because the lemons are very light, I don't quite know but this was <u>really starting to agitate me</u>. I then had to leave my stuff and try to find someone to help me. The girl who worked there sorted out the problem by scanning her card and pressing a few buttons on the system. But by the time I had finished checking out the few groceries that I needed, I thought to myself that I might

as well have waited in the line to get actual service! ... I was <u>quite frustrated by the</u> <u>whole process.</u>

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[Informant No. 18, Female]

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From the above extracts it is evident that technological elements relate to a customer's direct interaction with any form of technology during an encounter with a retailer and can have a beneficial (e.g., easy and convenient) or detrimental (e.g., frustrating and agitating) impact on the customer experience. Customers may interact with retailer facilitated technology (e.g., self-service technology, company mobile applications, company websites, ATMs, kiosks, point-of-sale technology, etc.) or with unaffiliated technology (e.g., other websites and social media), which may influence the customers' experience. Such technological elements may feature at various touch points across the different stages in the customer journey and in different retail contexts.

4.3 Communicative elements

The results from the thematic qualitative analysis indicate that consumers regularly observe the content and messages provided by the retailer. Such content or messages are one-way communication, sent from the retailer to the customer. Retailers may send promotional or informative one-way communication to customers throughout the customer journey using a number of retail channels. For example, promotional or informative messages from the retailer may be sent via email, SMS, direct mail, television advertisements, telephone calls and other communication channels. The data from the semi-structured interviews highlight that promotional communication plays a large role in the search and evaluation stages of the customer journey. For instance, an informant stated that the promotional emails from an online fashion apparel retailer influenced her to visit the online retailer's website and browse/purchase:

I get <u>constant email updates from ASOS</u> [fashion apparel retailer]. So yeah direct emails from ASOS I get at least every two to three days, I get an email from them saying what they've got going on or if they have a <u>sale of 20% off or free shipping</u> is a big one that I get quite often. So that's always good, and <u>I tend to go to the ASOS website more and buy more based on the fact that I get emails from them constantly reminding me,</u> so that's always good.

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[Informant No. 15, Female]

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She continues,

I'll usually shop on ASOS about once a month <u>purely because yeah it's so easily to access because they're constantly emailing me</u> and browsing would be weekly I'm always on there having a look.

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[Informant No. 15, Female]

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Another informant indicated that he went to the hardware store because he saw the specials

on some products that he wanted to buy:

I usually <u>browse the catalogs</u> at home to see what the <u>latest specials</u> are ... Last weekend there was a <u>Bunnings</u> [hardware store] <u>catalogon my coffee table at home and it said that Bunnings had a sale on some of the tools I need</u>. Yeah and that's why I went to the store.

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[Informant No. 2, Male]

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Informative messages are also observable at the channel where the experience is taking place.

For instance, an informant indicated how the synopsis (information provided by the retailer)

of the books helped her to choose a book to purchase online:

When I was browsing the Book Depository [online book store] they had a <u>little synopsis about each book</u> ... If there's a specific type of book that I like they usually put a few more of the same author or something that's similar at the bottom of the page. Take for example if it is an art book that I'm looking at, they'll find art either from the same author or something that's very similar that I might like; <u>this is very helpful</u>. If it's abstract art or surreal art or something and then <u>I'll have a look at the synopsis and I'll usually order that book too</u>.

<div align="right">

[Informant No. 3, Female]

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She then discussed how an informative email notified her that the book was dispatched from the store, which assured her of the delivery process:

> *I got an email today around midday to say that my books that I ordered had been dispatched. I purchased the books on Sunday and then I got an email today saying that they're coming, so I'm pretty sure it'll come by the end of this week or early next week but I'm pretty sure end of this week.*
>
> *[Informant No. 3, Female]*

Another informant stated that he received an informative email, notifying him of the booking confirmation, which gave him confidence in the purchase process and provided him with peace of mind:

> *I received the email confirmation shortly after making the booking and of course it made me feel that everything is in order, everything is in line and I didn't make a mistake. I think it reinforced my purchase decision plus it reinforced that the process that I went through was right. It's kind of mental satisfaction of course. Confidence as well, confidence not only in the company but also in my expertise. It gave me some peace of mind that I didn't make a mistake.*
>
> *[Informant No. 14, Male]*

From the above narratives it is evident that communicative elements, which involve one-way communication from the retailer to the customer (including both promotional and informative messages), are viewed as an important aspect of the experience at different touch points. While communication plays a large role during the search and evaluation stages of the customer journey, the extracts highlight that communicative elements are also dominant throughout the purchase and post-purchase stages of the customer journey.

4.4 Process elements

The process that customers take in order to achieve a particular outcome was found to play an important role in shaping their perceptions and evaluations of retail encounters. In physical retailer settings, the process involves aspects such as the checkout waiting time, the service

process and the manner in which customers move around the store; while in digital environments, process elements encompass the way customers navigate the site or technology platform. For instance, an informant indicated that the manner in which she moved around the store was frustrating during her experience at a department store:

> *I was at Myer* [department store] *and I find that it is really spaced around the place, so the checkouts are harder to find and the one that's normally there I think was taken over by a Santa thing so I had to then try to find another one. When I finally did, there was no staff available so I actually had to take my toys to the make-up area to pay for them, which was quite frustrating.*
>
> *[Informant No. 8, Female]*

Another informant indicated that the long waiting time, caused by the service delivery method, made her annoyed and left her not enjoying her meal at the café:

> *The way they do the food is that they have a set menu and they come out with different things and they ask you 'do you want it or you don't want it' and if you do they give it to you and if you don't they just carry on. I got really annoyed with the waiting time between each dish and because of that I didn't enjoy it at all so I didn't like waiting for my food. I would have preferred to have ordered one meal when I could enjoy it slowly than just eat a little bit of something and you don't want to eat too much because then you get full so you wait for the next but then you're starving and that really annoyed me, could have been quicker.*
>
> *[Informant No. 25, Female]*

Similarly, another informant described the way in which she ordered her food and beverages at a café (service process). While this was not her preferred method for placing an order at a café, she indicated that the service process was quick and easy:

> *At Mrs S* [café] *you basically have to go up and order, which is fine but I usually prefer for waiters to come and take my order. It was really quick and easy; we ordered cakes and coffee, which is just listed on the board so you pick whatever coffee you prefer. The cakes also came quite quickly to our table after ordering.*
>
> *[Informant No. 15, Female]*

In digital settings, customers predominantly base their evaluations of the digital processes on ease of use (Kim and Stoel 2004), and the responsiveness and timeliness of the technology (Yang and Jun 2002). For instance, an informant described how he had difficulty in paying for the products purchased from an online electronics retailer due to the long wait for the page to load and the responsiveness of the website:

> *I've had a couple <u>difficulties with them</u>* [online electronics retailer] *in terms of once you purchase products it goes to straight to PayPal but it just <u>takes such a long time to load that it doesn't work properly</u>. I ended up giving up and will just have to go the store next time I go to Garden City* [shopping centre].
>
> *[Informant No. 4, Male]*

Another informant described how the process of using the bank mobile application facilitates easy and timely banking transactions:

> *I usually use my ANZ app* [bank mobile application] *to pay my bills and transfer money between my accounts. It's <u>really easy to use and is handy</u>. My phone's in my pocket wherever I go so if I remember at the very last minute that I have to pay a bill I don't need to worry<u>, it takes literally 30 seconds to make a transaction</u>.*
>
> *[Informant No. 17, Male]*

From the above interview transcripts it is evident that 'process' is a critical element of customer experience touch points that occurs at different stages across the customer journey. The above discussion also highlights that various process aspects (e.g., waiting time, service delivery process and navigation) feature across several physical and digitals retail channels.

4.5 Employee-customer interaction elements

The findings from the semi-structured interviews demonstrate that customer interactions with employees of the retailer are an important aspect of customers' encounters at different touch points. The direct interaction between employees and customers was found to be critical,

especially during in-store purchases. The informants described that they felt comfortable relying on advice from experienced and knowledgeable employees to help them choose particular products. Some informants even explained that their positive experiences at the particular touch point were contributed by the quality of their interaction with the employee. As one interviewee stated:

> *When I was in Hong Kong shopping for my kids clothing a beautiful red dress came to my attention ... I liked it and I also liked a pair of jeans for my daughter, but I wasn't sure which one to buy, so I had a chat with one of the in-store assistants, asking her opinion on what she would think would suit a nine year old girl.*
>
> *[Informant No. 5, Male]*

He continues,

> *And she had this amazing insight because I was really confused about a red and a blue dress and jeans and a pair of shoes but of course I couldn't afford it all at the same time so I asked her a simple question, that if you were me, step in to my shoes, which one would you buy for your little girl who's about nine years old? She said I'd certainly buy the red dress and subconsciously I was aiming for the red dress and I really liked it and so I really went for the red dress and I also really wanted her opinion on the pair of shoes that matches with the red dress. And surprisingly again there were a bunch of shoes you know like seven, eight pairs with different designs and different colors but she pointed out to the pair that I liked the most and I did you know tell her explicitly that I wanted those pair of shoes. So I guess that's a positive experience in a way.*
>
> *[Informant No. 5, Male]*

Based on the above response, the interviewer asked the informant whether the sales assistant helped in reducing his confusion relating to the purchase. The informant's response confirmed that the employee interaction played a significant role in his purchase:

> *With the point of purchase information I had almost made up my mind like 80% and there was a little gap there and kind of filled in that. With her inputs I was more motivated and it closed the deal.*
>
> *[Informant No. 5, Male]*

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Employee-customer interactions are not limited to direct face-to-face encounters in-store; rather, employees interact with customers through many retail channels such as telephone, email and online forums. For instance, when describing the search and evaluation stages of the experience, an informant described how employees assisted her via email or telephone:

> *If let's say an item doesn't actually have my size, <u>there's an email page where I can email them and ask them if this size is available</u> and they'll usually respond within a couple of days … one day's about 24 hours. After which if they tell me they don't have my size, what I usually would do <u>is I'll call up the different retail boutiques</u> in eastern states because in Perth there's only a couple of them and in the eastern states they stock most of the styles that I like. And <u>if I call up they're usually very friendly with me</u> and they will check the stock for me even if it's a sale item because most places if it's a sales item they usually do not check the stock for me. Once if they do not have the stock, they tell me 'you might want to call this other boutique, this other Leona Edmiston* [fashion apparel retailer] *outlet might have it.' So they are pretty good with responding with my request and also they will tell me what's the charge.*
>
> *[Informant No. 11, Female]*

Employee-customer interactions also can have a detrimental influence on the experience, causing customers to negatively evaluate their encounter. For instance, an informant explained that she had a negative experience at a café when having to wait a significant amount of time for someone to acknowledge her and take her order:

> *We went in there to order a coffee and we had to <u>wait at least about fifteen minutes for someone to come and take an order</u>.*
>
> *[Informant No. 6, Female]*

She continues,

> *I mean for someone to be passing numerously, I mean it was not just one staff member it was one waiters, it's like a couple of them, taking turns and going around and checking everybody has their food. But none of them has come up and said you know 'have you all got your order?' <u>To me that is very poor customer service.</u>*
>
> *[Informant No. 6, Female]*

She further continued to explain how she felt about the staff members at the café,

The <u>staff was not being trained properly and they were ignorant</u>, they have no sense of customer service, they don't know what customer service means. It's very poor, very appalling.

<p align="right">*[Informant No. 6, Female]*</p>

Thus, it can be seen that the employee-customer interaction can have positive or negative influence on a customer's evaluations of his/her experience. This interface is not limited to in-store interactions alone, as employees interact with customers through other channels such as telephone, email and online chat. Furthermore, our anlysis based on the sequential incident technique, highlights that the employee-customer interaction occurs at different touch points across different stages of the customer journey.

4.6 Customer-customer interaction elements

The analysis of the interview transcripts has shown that in retail and service exchanges, customers interact directly or indirectly with other customers. Such social interactions and/or presence of other customers were found to impact customer experience. This was seen to be especially common in the pre-purchase stage. This could be due to the fact that when customers are searching for and/or evaluating a particular retailer, they often rely on word-of-mouth feedback from personal and familiar sources or seek feedback from individuals who have prior experience with the retailer. For instance, when searching for a hotel for stay, an informant indicated that she perused online blogs and reviews:

<u>I looked at a couple of blogs, TripAdvisor was another one I looked at, and then just some general reviews like on Google</u>. Like if I Googled the hotel, reviews and people were putting up photos and comments. Being a special occasion for my mum I wanted to make sure that we were getting the right price and the right experience that we were looking for.

<p align="right">*[Informant No. 1, Female]*</p>

The interviewer followed up on this response by asking the informant how important the reviews were in her forming the decision to book a hotel. The informant confirmed that the customer reviews played a significant role in her decision whether or not she would book a hotel:

> *I definitely think that <u>it makes a huge difference</u> in whether I will go ahead and make a hotel booking. It influences me more mainly I think if you get negative feedback.*
>
> <div align="right">[Informant No. 1, Female]</div>

She further continued to explain how negative reviews have a stronger impact on her decision to not book a hotel,

> *Even if there's a variation in the good reviews like some people saying "it was amazing and out of this world" and then others saying "it was just good". But I think <u>when you get a negative review or a couple of negative reviews</u>, which I've had experiences with other hotels where I was thinking of booking it and then I read back to back bad reviews and <u>then that straight away just puts you off</u>. Especially if it's saying something about "this hotel looks like this on their website but it doesn't look like that in real life".*
>
> <div align="right">[Informant No. 1, Female]</div>

During the purchase stage of the customer journey, especially in physical store environments, customers come into contact with other customers directly through specific interpersonal encounters or indirectly as part of the retail environment (Bitner 1992). Interaction with other customers, whether direct or indirect, can have a significant affect on the customer experience (Söderlund 2011). For instance, an informant indicated that the indirect interaction with other customers at a restaurant spoiled her dining experience:

> *We went to a restaurant for dinner to celebrate our wedding anniversary. The restaurant was quite pricy so I was expecting high quality food and service ... The dinner was great except for the people at the table next to us. <u>They were so loud, shouting, singing and getting quite drunk, which was very inappropriate in this</u>*

formal dining area. I was struggling to hear my partner who was sitting next to me, that really frustrated me … This ruined what would have been a wonderful evening.

[Informant No. 21, Female]

Customer-customer interactions were also found to occur post-purchase. An informant described a conversation he had with another customer at the Apple store (electronics store) when he went to the store to return a faulty product:

I went to the Apple store [electronics store] *to take back my Apple TV because it had stopped working ... I made a Genius appointment so I didn't have to wait too long for service. When I was waiting another customer came up to me and asked what the problem with my Apple TV was. I told them that the remote was not responding when I clicked certain buttons. They told me that the same issue happened to them a few months ago and they brought the Apple TV back and Apple replaced it with a new one free of charge. By the time the Apple employee came to discuss my issue, I had a pretty good idea of what to expect based on the conversation I had just had with the other customer.*

[Informant No. 9, Male]

An analysis of the above narratives clearly shows that customer-customer interactions occur during different stages across the customer journey. The analysis also shows that customer-customer interactions feature across different physical and digitals retail channels.

4.7 Product interaction elements

Product interactions involve the direct or indirect interactions customers have with the core tangible or intangible product offered by the retailer. Our analysis shows that customers interact with the core tangible or intangible product offered by retailers at various touch points. For example, as pointed out by an informant (Informant No. 12), product interactions at cafes involve the food and beverages offered, while product interactions at Internet service providers include the tangible hardware and the intangible Internet service provided (e.g., internet speed and reliability of the internet connection). As illustrated by the following

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extracts, product interactions can take place in both physical and digital channels. For instance, an informant (Informant No. 13) indicated that the indirect product interaction in a digital channel (social media – Instagram) influenced her to buy the product from the online store:

> *When I ordered the top and shorts, the reason why I got it was because they have really <u>amazing pictures on their Instagram</u> and I think that's what really sells their products. The <u>pictures pretty much shows the fabrics and the designs</u> and then I saw a couple of things come up in my Instagram that I really liked the top then I was looking for summer denim shorts so from there I just went on my Instagram and then went straight to their website and then selected in the order of tops and bottoms what I wanted, put it in the cart that they have on their website and ordered it.*
>
> *[Informant No. 13, Female]*

The above example clearly shows how an indirect experience with a product in an online channel can influence future purchases. Another informant described her direct experience with the product in a physical channel (café) during the consumption stage of the customer journey:

> *Once our <u>food came out we were horrified</u>. It was gross. I ordered a freshly squeezed juice but it looked so poorly juiced the water started to separate, it looked like old or something ... Then my sister's toast, in which they're meant to specialize in, was as hard as a rock, smeared with a bit of butter. I was so angry like basically furious, I want to complain so badly but I was too hungry to complain. I'll never go back and <u>I'll tell anyone I know not to go there</u>!*
>
> *[Informant No. 12, Female]*

She continues,

> *We were so disgusted like not only was the service shocking but the food; a simple piece of toast was inedible. How hard is it to make a piece of toast? <u>Their actual core product, what they're named after was horrible.</u> I could have done a better job with my toaster at home.*
>
> *[Informant No. 12, Female]*

In this instance, the direct product encounter not only caused negative emotions during the experience at the touch point, but also caused unfavourable customer intentions that may carry over to the next stage of the customer journey, with the customer intending to spread negative feedback by word-of-mouth.

During experiences with retailers, customers also encounter product elements that contribute to the evaluation of their experience at the touch point. For instance, during the airline consumption stage (i.e., the in-flight experience), customers encounter numerous tangible features such as the seats and entertainment systems. An informant described his direct encounter during his in-flight experience with two airlines, Virgin Australia and Air New Zealand during his codeshare flights, by stating:

> *I traveled from Auckland to Melbourne on Air New Zealand and Melbourne to Perth on Virgin Airlines ... The <u>quality of the seats on Virgin was great</u>; even economy class had leather seats. Air New Zealand had <u>standard material type seats</u>.*
> *[Informant No. 14, Male]*

He further described his experience with the entertainment system on both airlines, as below:

> *The <u>entertainment system on the Air New Zealand flight was really horrible</u> because it was taking time to start the movie or when you press enter it's like at least 20 or 30 seconds to perform the action. It's really very slow. I kind of gave up a number of times. Literally I could not enjoy the entertainment system at all on the Air New Zealand flight. <u>Virgin Australia, the partner, was perfect, excellent. It had a touch screen and you have a remote still</u>, but the touch screen is much more convenient and prompt. You touch anything and straight away it goes to the action so it was a very good experience flying with Virgin Australia.*
> *[Informant No. 14, Male]*

From the above extracts, it is evident that interactions with products, including both direct and indirect encounters, play a significant role in the retail experience at different touch points across the customer journey.

Overall, the data analysis provides sufficient support for recognizing distinct elements of customer experience touch points. The use of the sequential incident technique enabled us to identify touch points (episodes) at different stages along the customer journey. The frequency of accounts for each touch point element by stage in the customer journey presented in Table 4 illustrates that all touch point elements arise during the customer journey, including the search, evaluation, purchase and post-purchase stages.

Table 4: Touch point element accounts across the customer journey

Touch point elements	*Customer Journey*				
	Search	**Evaluation**	**Purchase**	**Post-purchase**	**Total**
Atmospheric	13	8	27	7	**55**
Technological	15	6	17	9	**47**
Communicative	14	5	15	10	**44**
Process	7	4	18	3	**32**
Employee-customer interaction	9	7	23	6	**45**
Customer-customer interaction	8	4	14	3	**29**
Product interaction	11	13	26	8	**58**
Total	**77**	**47**	**140**	**44**	**310**

5. Discussion

Through an inductive qualitative research approach, we built a complex and holistic understanding of customer experience touch points. Based on the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews, we identified seven distinct elements of customer experience touch points, including; atmospheric, technological, communicative, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction and product interaction elements.

Atmospherics as a distinct element of customer experience touch points found in our study is consistent with past research which suggests that the physical environment experienced by

customers influences consumer evaluations and responses (Turley and Milliman 2000). The atmospheric element essentially covers the physical characteristics that customers observe in their surroundings when interacting with any part of the retailer/service provider. Our research also shows technological aspects to be important elements in customers' encounters at different touch points. This could be explained by the recent technological innovations, in particular the internet, which has revolutionized the retailing and service landscape, thereby enabling retailers and service providers to engage customers in service co-production electronically in lieu of interaction with frontline employees (Lin and Hsieh 2011).

The emergence of communication as a distinct touch point element from our study could be supported by the fact that with quality information that is relevant to the customer, customers make better decisions leading to positive evaluations of their encounter (Shankar, Smith, and Rangaswamy 2003) which in turn adds to customer experience. Similarly, our study shows that process elements play a considerable role in customer assessments of their experience at various touch points. This finding is in line with past research that suggests that the process customers take in order to achieve a particular outcome plays an important role in shaping their perceptions and evaluations of retail and service provider encounters (van Riel et al. 2012).

Our study also finds that customer interactions with employees of the retailer/service provider are an important aspect of the customers' encounter at different touch points. This is in line with past research that points out that the interaction between customers and front-line employees plays a significant role in the customer experience in retail and service environments (Brady and Cronin 2001). Similarly, we found that customer-customer interactions plays an important role in the customer experience. This could be because, in

retail settings other customers within the exchange venue are observable (Brocato, Voorhees, and Baker 2012). Such social interactions and/or presence of other customers can have a profound impact on customer experience during the encounter at the touch point. Furthermore, the product interaction elements which emerged as a customer experience touch point element in our study is in line with Hoch (2002) who pointed out that customers experience the product when they search for, examine, consume and evaluate products and services. These include the direct (e.g., product usage) to indirect (e.g., seeing product displays) encounters, depending on a customer's level of interaction with a product.

It is evident from the findings of this study that different touch points comprise distinct elements, which may vary based on the retail channel of the touch point and the stage in the customer journey where the touch point occurs. This could be due to the fact that in physical retailer and service provider channels, atmospheric aspects such as the layout, colors, lighting, music and scents provide visual and sensory stimuli that may influence customer appraisals of the retail environment (Eroglu, Machleit, and Davis 2003). On the other hand, in digital environments the colors, graphics, music, layout and design provide atmospheric features (Eroglu, Machleit, and Davis 2003; Rose et al. 2012) that facilitate the formation of experience impressions (Gentile, Spiller, and Noci 2007).

Our findings also show that not all elements arise at each touch point; rather touch points are made up of varying combinations of the identified elements. In addition, touch points may comprise as little as one or as many as all of the touch point elements. For example, in the context of a café customer journey, a customer who is searching for a café online may interact with atmospheric (website design), product interaction (images), technological (online), customer-customer interaction (customer reviews of the café) and communicative

elements (online café promotions). Once a customer finds a café that he/she would like to visit, he/she may call the café to make a reservation, which includes process and employee-customer interaction elements. When a customer dines at a café, atmospheric, product interaction, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction and communicative elements form the touch point. After purchase, the customer may have a conversation about the café with a friend and recommend that they visit the café (customer-customer interaction element). Thus, drawing from the findings of the study it can be seen that the elements which are relevant to the customer at a particular touch point, together, constitute each touch point experience.

5.1 Implications

The identification and definition of the distinct elements that comprise customer experience touch points for different channels from this research is a significant contribution to the marketing literature and could form the basis for the development of a theoretical model of customer experience for empirical examination. In terms of methodological contribution, the study used sequential incident technique to capture the dynamic, procedural nature of the customer experience, which is subjective and perceptual to the individual customer. This enabled us to elicit the detailed descriptions of the touch points a customer encounters in the course of the customer journey.

The results of the study offer managers an understanding of the distinct touch point elements that occur along the customer journey that enhance customer experience. To gain a complete end-to-end understanding of the customer journey, managers will be able to draw from these insights and conduct 'touch point mapping'. Customer journey maps incorporate the view of (i) the customer journey process, (ii) retail channels, and (iii) relevant elements at each touch

point. Mapping of key touch points and identifying the distinct elements at each touch point relevant to various retail channels will provide managers with a deeper insight into the entire customer journey. The findings from this research emphasize that touch point identification and measurement should be assessed from a customer perspective. In other words, companies should view the experience from outside in. Customers are not exposed to the web of organizational processes that operate behind the scenes to deliver their experiences. They only view a series of interactions from the outside in. Therefore, companies should manage customer experience by understanding the customer's point of view. In doing so, the identified touch point elements should be considered by managers to gain a more holistic and complex understanding of customer experience throughout the customer journey.

6. Conclusion

Research to date has considered customer experience predominantly as an overall evaluation based on an accumulation of experiences (e.g., Rose et al. 2012), thus restricting the understanding of the key decisive moments between the customer and the retailer. The present study is the first one to identify, categorize and define the distinct elements that occur during customer experiences at different touch points. We developed a holistic understanding of a situation (i.e., touch point) through an in-depth analysis of recalled accounts of customer experiences from informants by using the sequential incident technique. A thematic analysis of the semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in this study has led to the identification of seven distinct elements of customer experience touch points - atmospheric, technological, communicative, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction and product interaction elements. The analysis also shows that different touch points comprise distinct elements, which may vary based on the retail channel of the touch point and the stage in the customer journey where the touch point occurs. Further, our study shows that not all

elements arise at each touch point; rather touch points are made up of varying combinations of the identified elements. In addition, touch points may comprise as little as one or as many as all of the eight touch point elements. This study contributes to the marketing literature in terms of providing the basis for the development of a theoretical model of customer experience for empirical examination. The results of the study offers managers an understanding of the distinct touch point elements that occur along the customer journey that enhance customer experience. The findings emphasize that touch point identification and measurement should be assessed from a customer perspective, and that identified touch point elements should be considered by managers to gain a more holistic and complex understanding of customer experience throughout the customer journey.

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