

Multichannel customer journeys as service systems – implications for S-D Logic

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Abstract

Purpose – People are exposed to increasingly complex multi-channel shopping journeys, at times generating new behaviors such as showrooming and webrooming. This complexity, however, seems to be added primarily from the marketer’s perspective. From a consumer perspective, these new behaviours emerged as a way of simplifying the decision-making processes in the ever-expanding digital universe. This paper aims to address the question of how this shift in consumption practice affects the traditional service system and its locus of control, and thus draw implications in light of the pillars of SD logic.

Methodology / Approach – The research draws on an inductive study. First-hand reports of consumer shopping journeys for cosmetic products were obtained using two data collection methods: (1) personal diary and (2) interview. Twenty respondents (all women) were asked to complete a cosmetics shopping diary, recording their thoughts, feelings and actions related to cosmetics products over 2 weeks, using everyday, personal language. As it was an electronic diary, respondents were encouraged to incorporate multimedia — photos, videos, links – relating to their purchase and consumption journeys.

Findings – The aggregate analysis of reported shopping journeys helped identify key multi-channel influences across different stages. The readiness and usefulness of the firm, and consumers themselves, as operant resources, to shape the multichannel experience at each stage is explored, and hence the locus of control. The analysis also demonstrates how customer journeys focus on value-in-use and so blur the distinctions between products and services, leading to (self)managed experiences.

Originality / Value –Through inductive analysis, our research allows for realistic patterns to emerge of how consumers use and react to different media, channels and devices in their shopping journeys, thus helping in theory building. We recognize (1) actor-to-actor interaction as an integral aspect of social-mediated shopping, (2) the interdependencies between products and services in constructing multichannel journeys and (3) the complexity of the design, management and improvement of multichannel shopping journeys as service systems.

In terms of practical contribution, customer journeys are increasingly used for marketing automation purposes to guide customers through the purchase funnel by matching marketing activities against stages in the buyer journey. This indicates that there are strong links between customer journeys on one hand and customer experience management (CX) on the other. Hence deeper understanding of the former explored in our paper, aims to help build more responsive firms and ecosystems.

Keywords – customer journey, experience design, multi-channel marketing, digital marketing, service system, Web 2.0

Paper Type – empirical paper

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1. Introduction

Across industries new digitally-mediated consumption behaviours have challenged traditional business models. In music, for instance, consumers changed from passive buyers of pre-produced and pre-packaged CDs sold through physical stores, with rare ability to listen to them beforehand, to an active audience of potentially crowd-funded YouTube bands, listening to which may prompt them to purchase a single track on iTunes anytime, anyplace. Similar changes have been occurring in many other sectors, including education (e.g. MOOCs), personal fitness (e.g. Jawbone) and car rental (e.g. Uber).

These examples would indicate that people are exposed to increasingly complex multichannel shopping journeys and consumption behaviours. It might be argued however that the complexity has been added from a system perspective, yet from a consumer perspective new behaviours are emerging as a way of simplifying the decision-making processes in the ever expanding digital universe. Some of those new behaviours include peer-to-peer sharing, crowdsourcing, showrooming and webrooming, all of which impact the resultant co-created value.

We believe research is needed to understand how those behaviours are impacting what SD logic might term a service system (Tronvoll, et al. 201) or a service delivery network (Tax, et al. 2013). At a higher level of abstraction, therefore, this paper proposes SD logic and its related concepts such as service system and value co-creation as useful and pertinent conceptualisations. Yet at a granular (and applied) level, by analysing a specific concept of the multichannel customer journey, the paper challenges the entrenched provider-centric (supply-focused) perspective inherent in service systems thinking.

2. Purpose of paper

This paper's aim is to analyse how the practice of multichannel shopping journeys in the ever-expanding digital universe affects the service system and its locus of control.

Our paper seeks to enrich and extend prior research on SSTs (Åkesson , et al. 2014) and multi-level service design (Patricio et al, 2011) by adopting the consumer viewpoint. It is a much needed addition to SD logic discourse, complimenting the service provider view of service system, which is the subject of a growing number of articles. More specifically, by adopting inductive research we allow for realistic patterns to emerge of how consumers use and react to different media and channels in their shopping journeys. Our study explores and maps those journeys, aiding understanding of shopping and consumption in a service system, rather than providing advice on the 'design' of customer experiences. We believe this perspective also benefits practice. Such insights are of direct relevance to brands and agencies, to help them manage the customer experience better and analyse channel attribution. It is imperative for brands to embrace the multichannel experience, yet seamlessly integrating the physical and digital worlds is an on-going challenge.

3. Customer journey as a level of analysis in SD logic

The term customer journey stems from service design field and has recently been introduced in service system literature (Nenonen et al. 2008; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). It often however stands outside the core discourse and little effort has been made so far to link or contrast it with other SD logic constructs (with notable exception of Nenonen, et al. 2013). Yet extant research provides some valuable insights into the meaning and characteristics of customer journeys, which this paper attempts to systematise. The first part of the literature review defines the concept of *customer journey*, and positions *customer journey* as a unit of analysis. The following sections juxtapose it with previous research on service systems, customer experience and finally consumer decision-making, to identify commonalities and differences between those constructs.

According to Nenonen et al. (2008) *“The Customer Journey is a systematic approach designed to help organisations understand how prospective and current customers use the various channels and touch points, how they perceive the organisation at each touch point and how they would like the customer experience to be. This knowledge can be used to design an optimal experience that meets the expectations of major customer groups, achieves competitive advantage and supports attainment of desired customer experience objectives.”*

Zomerdijk and Voss (2010) note that a customer journey refers to a series of touchpoints and *“involves all activities and events related to the delivery of the service from the customer’s perspective”*. This starting definition, though aligned to our consumer-centric perspective, does assume that the journey is related to activities, whereas we adopt a view (one that makes it distinct from service blueprinting) that customer journey has cognitive, conative as well as behavioural dimensions. In this view we concur with the Head of Service Design at IDEO who uses the customer journey maps to understand not only how customers behave across a journey, but also what they are feeling, and what their motivations and attitudes are across that journey (ibid). An example of a customer journey map, explicitly noting the emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses during a broadband purchase is presented in Figure 1 below.

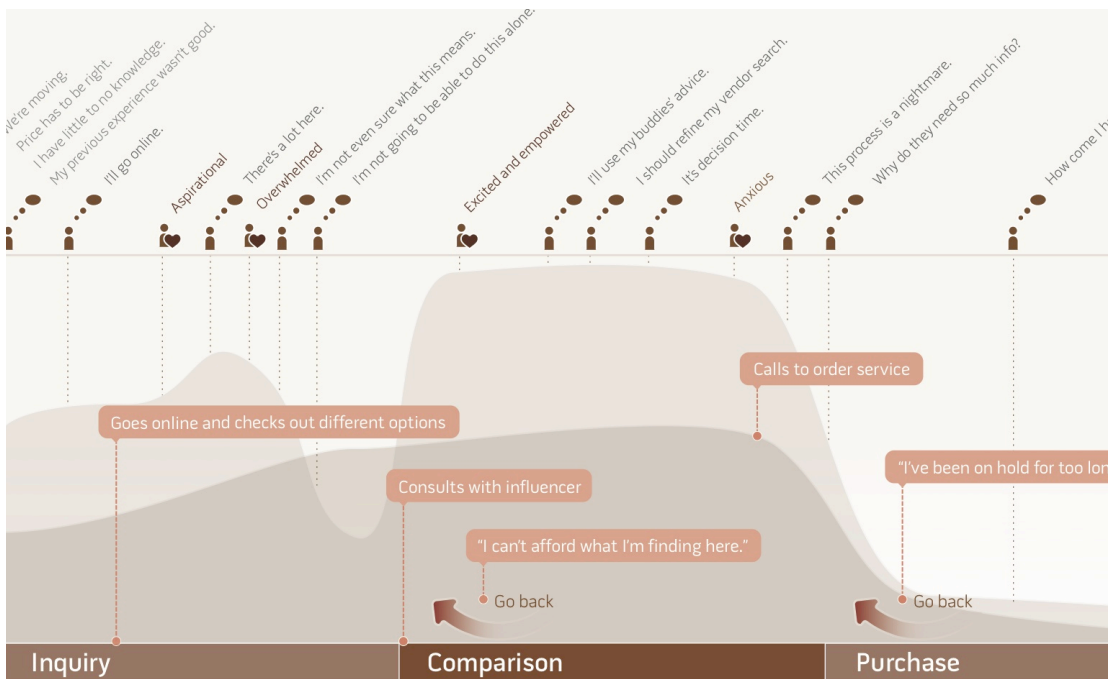


Figure1. An excerpt from a customer journey map. Source: Effective UI <http://www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2011/09/the-value-of-customer-journey-maps-a-ux-designers-personal-journey.php>

Åkesson et al (2014) in their paper on customer experience in Self-service Technologies (SSTs) recognise that the customer journey does not only refer to interactions and touchpoints during a shopping trip, but to the entire process of co-creating value *prior, during and after a service encounter*. This is a very important characteristic as it implies that a service provider may have very little control over some parts of the resulting journey. In relation to the temporal nature of the customer journey, Tax, McCutchoen and Wilkinson (2013) recognise that a customer journey can involve a series of exchanges that may extend over a considerable period of time and with a variety of providers contributing to the experience.

Patricio et al (2011) identify some drawbacks and limitations of the customer journey concept, asserting that "*it does not offer an overall view of the service system structure or an integrated approach to the different levels of service design*". We believe this criticism of customer journey as a unit of analysis is a matter of the lens adopted. To that end, in the following sections, we juxtapose customer journey with related constructs such as service systems (3.1), customer experience (3.2) and finally consumer decision-making (3.3), to identify commonalities and differences.

3.1 Service systems and customer journeys

The meta-analysis of service system definitions by Tronvoll et al (2011), demonstrates the all inclusive nature of the term, referring not only to the service performed, but the actors,

technologies and spaces e.g. the various resources inherent in the system. However, of those various definition compared, only one makes reference to 'cyber' or digital aspect of service systems and that is Stanicek and Winkler (2010p. 113). Despite this apparent lack of digital contextualisation, one could argue that nowadays majority of service systems integrate a digital channel, device or platform. It seems that the service system literature has not yet adapted to the contemporary reality which could be defined as "a complex socio-technical systems, where the interactions among humans, technical artifacts, organizations, and norms play a crucial role" (Guarino, 2013).

Simultaneously a network perspective has gained a lot of traction in service research. A recent paper by Tax, McCutchoen and Wilkinson (2013) proposed the Service Delivery Network while others talk about collaborative networks (Närvänen , et al. 2014). In contrast to Tax, McCutchoen and Wilkinson (2013), who propose the construct of Service Delivery Network (SDN) that 'in the eyes of the customer, are responsible for the provision of overall service experience' (ibid, p. 454) and one that that is designed and co-ordinated by a provider, in our paper there is no assumed coordination between organisations to deliver the customer journey. We treat customer journey as emergent and user-constructed. In our conceptualisation of the journey, the customer is the integrator, and the service providers / actors may not even be aware that they are being integrated into the service system by a given customer, as they may be passive content providers e.g. product reviewers, or media channels.

In this vein, Kwan and Hottum (2014) posit that customers may receive service from one or more service providers under one service experience expectation, forming a service system network. These service system networks (SSNs), unlike SDNs do not have to be, and often are not co-ordinated by any one of the providers. Kwan and Hattom indicate that service providers could form parts of the customer journey in parallel (giving an example of buying multiples items from different vendors on Amazon) or sequentially (giving an example of visiting multiple medical offices for procedures based on a single referral). Such conceptualisation is valuable as it illustrates limited control of the customer experience by any one service agent.

Patricio et al. (2011) contribute a different view of a Service System Network (SSN) and to do so compare it to Service System Architecture (SSA). In their view SSNs can link the multiple channels and interfaces the customers may use in their journeys. *"Based on the matrix developed in the SSA, the SSN maps the alternative paths customers may take across different service encounters forming the service experience. Each path represents one possible customer journey across different touchpoints or service encounters (ibid)."* By providing the navigation view of the service system the SSN concept can guide the design of multichannel, multi-device and multi-platform experiences.

3.2 Multichannel customer experience and customer journeys

The concept of customer experience is well established within the SD logic discourse (Kwan & Hottum, 2014; Nenonen, et al. 2008) and service research as a whole (Patricio et al, 2008; Schmitt, 1999, Tax, McCutchoen and Wilkinson, 2013). Customer experiences are formed based on perception of all moments of contact between the customer and various actors in a given customer journey. These perceptions, when compared to prior expectation, can lead to different emotional, cognitive and behavioural outcomes such as customer satisfaction, advocacy or product return. In the increasingly digitised marketplace customers use multiple channels, devices and platforms to reach the end state. With an explosion of mobile technologies and social media, multichannel shopping has become a journey in which customers choose the route they take and which, arguably, needs to be mapped to be understood (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). The dynamic journey is reflective of the fact that the Web is a place where consumers can collect information quickly, in a number of different formats and from different, more or less credible, sources.

Despite digital channels, platform and devices nowadays forming a big part of service delivery, the digital context is almost entirely absent from the service science and SD logic papers on the topic. Even those scholars that recognise technology in the customer experience e.g. Tax, McCutchoen and Wilkinson (2013), only briefly recognise the implications of the digitally-mediated nature of customer experience. Significantly, research in services fails to take into account context-specific characteristics of digital media and culture, which undoubtedly colour the service system delivering those experiences, such as ease of search for information, rise of aggregators and infomediaries, providers as media and growth of the peer economy, among others.

One of the most commonly quoted characteristic of the Web is the ease of peer-to-peer communication. In management research, several studies point to peer opinion as more trustworthy than company views (e.g. Hsiao, et al. 2010). Yet discourse on the participatory nature of digital shopping and consumption experiences is almost entirely absent from service research literature. A recent study by Närvänen, et al. (2014) evaluates general collaborative consumption experiences. However we propose that peer-to-peer communication and social influences in the digital ecosystem as a whole hold profound consequences for the nature and complexity of the multichannel service system.

In order to evaluate whether and how the context-specific characteristics of digital media and culture influence the multichannel service systems, we propose to analyse each stage in the decision-making process.

3.3 Consumer decision-making in multi-channel shopping

Existing consumer decision-making models were developed in pre-Internet days and have remained for the most part unquestioned in the digital marketing discourse. The seminal Engel, Kollatt, and Blackwell (EKB) consumer decision-making model (1968) is one of the core theories of consumer behaviour. It proposes a sequential process of decision-making consisting of:

1. Problem recognition;
2. Information Search;
3. Evaluation of alternatives;
4. Purchase;
5. Post-purchase evaluation

(Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1968).

It envisions the purchase process as a series of discrete actions, typically precipitated by a conscious recognition of an unsatisfied need and is grounded in a micro, utilitarian perspective. Consequently it conceptualises a solitary, rational decision maker who systematically accesses and sifts through information to maximize utility (Foxall, 1989). It asserts that consumers go through a fixed sequence of distinct stages when they make purchase decisions.

An empirical study by Frambach et al. (2007) has demonstrated that '(each) *buying stage has an important influence on channel usage intention*'. Consumers seek different benefits at the pre-purchase stage than during or and after purchase. This can lead to dynamic channel preference during the whole buying decision process. While Frambach et al. (2007) focused on the dichotomy of online-offline, such dualism is now largely outdated and the utilization of the growing number of channels by consumers is only now starting to be examined in the

light of consumer decision-making. For example, Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) extended and enriched the decision-making model by identifying an 'orientation stage' in multichannel shopping, which can precede need recognition, and which integrates a mixture of signals from multiple sources and users that guides subsequent decision-making stages. Grewal, Roggeveen and Runyan (2013) evaluated how social, mobile and in-store shopper marketing tactics are affecting pre-purchase, purchase and post purchase practices.

The consumer journey and consumer decision-making process are sometimes used interchangeably, yet they differ in scope. The former examines the cognitive and behavioural aspects that are involved in the process of information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase and post-purchase stages (Hoyer, 1984). On the other hand, customer journey can include behavioural, cognitive as well as emotional aspects of the process. The journey also does not have to have an assumed start or end point, which allows the model to be more adaptable to various consumer – product interaction processes, and not be limited to sequential steps (Thompson et al. 2003).

We propose the customer journey as an alternative conceptualization of consumers' multichannel behaviours and, through inductive research, we map it against each stage in the consumer-decision making model. We believe this perspective has a potential to uncover the *hidden* social and multichannel influences in the process, as well as enrich the mostly provider-centric service-system literature.

4. Methodology

This research employed multi-method approach, utilising qualitative data collection methods. It aimed to explore first-hand reports of consumer shopping journeys for cosmetic products using two data collections methods (1) personal diary (2) interview. Darley, Blankson and Luethge assert that knowledge about online consumer behaviour could benefit from '(1) what people do or say in response to what people are presented within an experiment and (2) observed causality'. To that effect, first-hand accounts of multichannel shopping journeys form the basis of this research. A cosmetic product context was chosen in order to provide respondents with a realistic shopping situation.

An inductive study, as recommended by Patricio et al (2011) and Åkesson et al (2014), was adopted, using guided introspection, asking 20 respondents (all women) to complete a

cosmetic shopping diary. They were asked to record their thoughts, feelings and actions related to cosmetic products over two weeks, using everyday, personal language. A well-designed beauty diary with an example entry was given to each participant to incentivise them to participate. As it was an electronic diary, respondents were encouraged to incorporate multimedia – photos, videos, links.

The resulting sample of 16 research diaries was obtained and each one was followed with phase 2 - an individual interview, to elucidate on diary entries and collect more targeted information. The data from both phases was analysed using thematic analysis. An encoding process for qualitative information resulted in a list of themes and was useful to discovering patterns in phenomena (Boyatzis, 1998). The 16 responses were hand-drawn to represent each individual's shopping journey map. Nenonen et al (2008) define customer journey maps a visual, process-oriented method for conceptualising and structuring people's experiences. These maps were used to *"reflect the thought patterns, processes, considerations, paths and experiences that people go through in their daily lives"*. Based on similarities and differences in their reported journeys, respondents' maps were classified into segments, allowing for higher level abstraction.

5. Discussion of findings

In this section, through aggregate analysis of reported shopping journeys we identify the types and nature of influence at different stages of the decision-making process. Subsequently, we conduct a segmentation analysis of the self-reported cognitive, conative and behavioural clues which we develop into a typology of consumer journeys. Finally, we identify key dimensions of customer journey as a service system (network) thus providing added utility to the service research field.

5.1 Multiple and simultaneous influences in Multichannel Customer Journeys

The process of mapping respondents' self-reported shopping journeys indicated a number of different influences and actors influencing this journeys. Some of those actors are service providers, but much of the time, the interaction is with other entities forming the service system network, such as peers, media channels, aggregators, and apps. One respondent stated:

... I like watching bloggers and YouTubers. The products that they use look interesting but the

information is just a brief product review. I Google for more in-depth reviews from blogs online. I also sometimes use the online store for references of colour swatches or product

ratings. After I see the swatch and there is a store nearby, I would want to go in the store to try it out for myself. If not, I feel a bit more risk and take more time considering if I should buy the product. I will often ask my friends for advice ...

Furthermore, we observed that a single influencer may re-appear during the journey multiple times. For example, a peer review might be an important touchpoint during an orientation stage, but may also have a significant impact on purchase decision during an evaluation of alternatives.

Thirdly, interactions with various actors may also be occurring simultaneously during one shopping stage, as illustrate in the above quote, where a user is simultaneously consulting a search engine and peer review, or indeed may be using YouTube as a search engine to gain peer reviews.

Table 1 presents the channels and information sources that have been identified as most influential at each stage in the cosmetic shopping process.

Table 1 Primary channels and influencers at different stages of cosmetic customer journey

Observed stages	Description	Primary Channels observed	Primary influencers
Orientation stage / horizon scanning	At this stage, consumers do not think of themselves as shopping. They are consciously or unconsciously scanning the marketplace and referring to their own previous experience – which may result in need or wont recognition	Friends, bloggers, product reviews, videos (from YouTube and social networks), magazines, product display (in-store and online), prior experience Information	Peers, media and service providers

search			
Information Search	Consumers have intention to shop and search for information prior to shopping. They try to get directed information from product reviews, ratings and Swatches	Blogs, videos, review sites and friends	Search engines, aggregators, curators and infomediaries Peers Service providers
Evaluation of alternatives	Evaluation Consumers narrow down the choice of purchase and search more information on price, physical attributes, availability and purchase channels. Trying product in-store and browsing product online are widely reported at this stage	Physical store, online store, mobile channel, as well as friends, social media for confirmation	Service provider Media Aggregators Peers
Purchase	At this stage, consumers make a decision regarding final purchase. Physical store was the most preferred point of purchase for cosmetics product, followed by the online store	Physical store or online store	Physical Store Online store Aggregator or infomediary
Post-purchase	Consumers tend to share their shopping experience through word of mouth (WOM). Offline WOM - telling friends about their cosmetics experience - was more widely reported than eWOM through	Friends and / or social media	Peers Media Service Provider

Source: Adapted from (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014)

In addition to actor-influencers, as indicated in table 1, the self-reported stories we collected indicate that there are hidden influencers in the service system, such as media owners, PR agencies, or even sensors embedded in products that convey information to and from the customer. These entities enable interaction and communication, by linking stages in the customer journey together. In fact, a major part of each journey, in contrast to the traditional service system view, is made up of communication between actors and the resulting thoughts feelings and actions of the customer. If we think of actors as notes, the customer journey is like music - it happens between the notes. This makes it a challenging concept to systematically analyse, yet increases the value of inductively mapping first-hand reports of journeys.

5.2 Typology of customer journeys

As reported in Wolny & Charoensuksai (2014) aggregate analysis masks a myriad of shopping journeys, some extensive and high in channel-hopping and others shorter and low in information search. All collected journeys were mapped to detect patterns and based on cognitive, conative and behavioural clues, segments have emerged leading to the identification of the following typology:

1. **Impulsive journeys** – customers tend to spend less time searching for information in any channel. Instead, they refer to their previous experience, their friends and product trial as information sources to make swift purchasing decisions.
2. **Balanced journeys** - exhibit an extended search for information and evaluation (often through social media and peer reviews), which makes them distinct from impulsive journeys. Here customers initiate their intention to purchase through emotions and support their decision through cognitive evaluation.
3. **Considered journeys** – such journeys have an extended pre-shopping stage, where

respondents do not think of themselves as shopping, but gather information from a number of sources, including media news and peer product reviews. The orientation stage has an extended effect on the ultimate purchase decision by influencing the permission set customers have in their minds.

Those journey segments coincide with some of the decision-making types proposed by Solomon (2002) in the offline setting, and provide additional utility as the three journey types identified here have been inductively mapped as patterns in the multichannel, multi-platform and multi-device environment.

Crucially for service system context, in some cases, a firm's customers may have very similar SDNs, with similar actors and stages but the customer journey may consist of very different thoughts, and emotional responses leading to different behaviours. This in turn affects any of the various providers' ability to manage service encounters.

6. Conclusions and Implications for SD logic

The findings from collected customer journeys for cosmetics, evidently hold insights into a more general consumer behaviours utilising multiple platforms, channels and devices in their shopping and consumption their journeys. What's more, those journeys become (self-)service system, delivered by a variety of actors and providers, and are influenced by hidden mechanisms within the digital ecosystem.

Based on an abstraction of the above findings, the following dimensions of customer journeys are proposed to aid analysis in the context of SD logic.

Dimensions of the customer journey concept:

- involves behavioural, emotional and cognitive effects
- involves not only the service encounter but the value co-creation process prior, during an after service encounter
- a service provider may have very little control over some part of the journey
- customer is the resource integrator within a journey, which may involve several other actors in parallel and sequentially
- those actors may be firms, SSTs (e.g. sensors), social networks, individual peers, media owners, agencies, infomediaries or the customer him/herself

- customer journey has a temporal dimension and can last from few seconds to months or even years
- customer journey has a special dimensions can occur in physical as well as virtual spaces

7. Managerial implications and future research

It is imperative for brands to embrace the multichannel experience, yet seamlessly integrating the physical and digital worlds is an on-going challenge. We have demonstrated that consumers navigate the channels in a way that suits them on any particular shopping occasion, and expect the retailers to be accessible through the relevant touchpoint.

Customer journey analysis is increasingly used for marketing automation purposes to guide customers through the purchase funnel by matching marketing activities against stages in the buyer journey in both B2C and B2B contexts. This indicates that there are strong links between customer journeys on one hand and customer experience management (CX) on the other. Hence deeper understanding of the former explored in our paper, aims to help build more responsive firms and ecosystems.

Further research is called for on inductively mapping customer cognitive, conative and behavioural journeys in various product-service constellations, in order to understand the level of abstraction possible from our proposed findings. With increasing automation of interactions, through use of sensors and Internet of Things, stronger integration of those aspects into the contemporary understanding of a service system will be the next stage of our research.

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