MAPPING THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: UNVEILING THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY IN THE NAIL INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

After a period of a low-touch customer service approach due to the recent pandemic, delivering value to customers again becomes a focus for entrepreneurs in originally designed business models in the service industry. Pandemic experiences have prompted customers to accept the usual service process changes readily. A valuable tool for analyzing customer behavior through the most critical touchpoints of the value delivery process is customer journey mapping. In this research, the CJM tool was applied using the example of a micro-entrepreneur in the nail industry. Customer experiences (N = 476) indicate that users attach the most significant importance to appointment availability, loyalty/reward programs, staff expertise, and price. By creating a customer journey map for customers of the analyzed business entity and other surveyed service users of different providers, differences and potential improvement touchpoints in the entrepreneur's service process have been identified.

KEYWORDS: Customer Journey Mapping, Customer Experience, Nail Industry

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, providers' interest in satisfying customers has gone through various stages. From the era of manual, artisanal production and direct, almost familial connections with customers, through the period of mass production and focus on product quality, to modern times and the global growth of the service sector's share, where delivering greater value to customers is once again placed at the forefront (Reis et al., 2003: 195-196). Empowering customers through the increasing use of online options for price and offer comparison, personalized content, and greater trust in online reviews has put many smaller or local providers in a position where they

must offer their products or services, aware that customers will compare them with the offerings and experiences they enjoy with market leaders like Amazon, Google, or Apple (Duncan et al., 2016, 2016: 3). Furthermore, the recent COVID-19 pandemic, with its low-touch approach, has brought about a meteoric rise in online sales. For instance, between the end of March and mid-May 2020, global online sales increased by 29% (We Are Social, Hootsuite, July 2020: 163), and this growth trend persisted even after the pandemic. Weekly online sales (age 16-64) increased by 52.2% in the first quarter of 2023 compared to the first quarter of 2021 (We Are Social, Meltwater, 2023a: 300; We Are Social, Hootsuite, 2021: 167). Similar trends are observed in Croatia, where in 2022, compared to 2021, there was a 3.9% increase in the number of online customers, or a growth of 94,000 customers, totaling 2.51 million (We Are Social, Meltwater, 2023b: 59). These trends have accelerated the necessity of business digitalization and the easier accessibility of products and services in the online offering.

With the change in the structure of the purchasing process, the pandemic has temporarily or permanently altered consumption patterns and customer behavior. For example, in the nail care industry, which is the focus of this paper, customers have become more inclined towards healthier lifestyles and products. In 2020 and 2021, more innovative, safer, and non-toxic products were introduced (Barnes, 2021). The nail salon industry, chosen as the focus of this micro-level study, is a large market. For illustration, the global nail salon market size was valued at USD 11 billion in 2022 (https://www.grandviewresearch.com), whereas the global cinema box office market was valued at 25.34 billion in 2022 (https://www.pwc.com). A similar comparison for the Croatian market is not available.

Timely recognition of changes in customer behavior can be facilitated by tools such as customer journey mapping (CJM), the role of which in enhancing customer experience during the decision-making process, is analyzed in the following sections of this paper. Furthermore, a customer journey map is elaborated upon using the example of a micro-level business entity in the nail care industry.

2. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The concept of the customer journey is closely related to the notion of customer experience. For instance, Følstad & Kvale (2018: 15) found this link in 40 (out of 45) papers in their systematic literature review. It is also evident from the comprehensive definition of customer experience as a multidimensional construct based on cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory, and social reactions to a company's offerings throughout the entire customer purchasing journey (Waqas et al., 2021: 151).

The pioneers of studying consumer experience as a distinct research area are considered to be Pine and Gilmore (1998), who classified experience as a critical element of consumer offerings akin to goods, products, and services, as well as Schmitt (1999), who established a distinction between traditional and experiential marketing and introduced five strategic experiential modules—sense, feel, think, act, and relate experience (Waqas et al., 2021: 144).

The origin of the CJM concept is somewhat unclear and is associated with Jan Carlzon's concept of moments of truth (1987). However, the actual phenomenon of CJM is attributed to authors Carbone and Haeckel, who spoke about the experience blueprint in their seminal work (1994, cited in Kalbach, 2021: 287). The beginnings of applying customer journey for mapping

customer experience are tied to authors Theng et al. (1999, cited in Pantouvakis & Gerou, 2022: 7), who aimed to enhance service processes by mapping customer experience.

Mapping is a tool frequently used in service design methodology, and the user-centered approach involves observing actual user behavior and involving them in improving and creating services (Marquez et al., 2015: 136).[1] In addition to CJM, these tools encompass various others, such as service blueprints, experience maps, or mental model diagrams, which Kalbach (2021: 5) refers to as alignment diagrams, as they visualize the interaction between people and organizations.

CJM is defined from various standpoints. In their literature review of consumer journey and CJM, Pantouvakis & Gerou (2022: 9) found 146 scientific articles (between 1999 and 2019) and, through various approaches, distilled this definition: CJM is a depiction of the customer journey that visualizes the overall customer experience (CX) and includes all touchpoints between the customer and the company or service throughout the entire decision-making process and customer journey stages.

One key concept within CJM is touchpoints between customers and the company or service, through which the entire customer service process is analyzed. It is crucial to take a holistic approach to view the entire service - the entire journey, rather than just individual touchpoints, as excellent performance at individual touchpoints might result in a less satisfactory overall customer experience. Customer journey, in fact, significantly correlates with customer satisfaction or the propensity to recommend a service/product compared to touchpoints across various industries (Duncan et al., 2016: 5 and 20). However, CJMs are not just lists of touchpoints. They include a deeper understanding of customer motives and attitudes, decision-making processes, primary elements of customer satisfaction, and more (Kalbach, 2021: 299). Such an approach has been applied in this paper and is further explained in the following section.

3. METHODOLOGY

The CJM in this paper depicts the activities, thoughts/feelings, customer pains, objectives, situations (satisfaction with specific service elements), and touchpoints, following the approach suggested by Kalbach (2021: 189 and 300). It usually includes a (marketing) persona description, but due to volume, it is not the subject of this paper. A questionnaire was prepared to determine customer motives, attitudes, and behaviors that cover three major stages of the decision-making process or the customer journey, following the Lemon & Verhoef (2016: 77) approach: pre-purchase stage (recognition, search), purchase stage (choice, ordering, payment), and post-purchase stage (recommendation, loyalty). The questionnaire contains a total of 51 statements that explore the mentioned components of the customer journey, as well as the popularity of specific salons among respondents, the most commonly used types of services, preferred payment methods, and an additional four demographic variables (age, gender, status, and residence/domicile). All statements were independently developed. For most variables (except demographic ones), an interval (Likert) scale with five levels was used. Reliability testing determined that variables tested with the Likert scale have an acceptable Cronbach's α value of 0.847. The questionnaire for online completion was prepared using the Google Forms

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[1] Although the authors Marquez et al. (2015) use the term "user" instead of "customer," the concepts of customer experience (CX) and user experience (UX) should not be equated. A more detailed differentiation of the terms can be found, for example, in Lee et al., 2018; 14.

tool. Since no pilot testing of the finalized questionnaire was conducted, this is indicative research.

The analysis was conducted in the field of nail care and on the example of a micro-entity - a nail care salon as a case study. The questionnaire was distributed to the email addresses of around 150 users of the nail care salon as a case study, as well as to the addresses of students, former students, and staff of the Polytechnic of Rijeka. A total of 476 complete responses were collected during June 2023. The sample characteristics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample - Excerpt

Characteristics	N	%	Characteristics	N	%
Gender	**476**		*Age (years)*	**476**	
Female	465	97,7	< 18	4	0,8
Male	11	2,3	18 - 24	48	10,1
Residence/Domicile	**476**	%	25 - 34	222	46,6
I live in the City Center	62	13,0	35 - 44	148	31,1
I live outside the City Center of Rijeka	212	44,5	45 - 54	33	6,9
I live in Primorje-Gorski Kotar County	58	12,2	55 or more	21	4,4
I live outside Primorje-Gorski Kotar County	144	30,3			

Source: research

For a global comparison of this sample characteristics, the women segment dominated the market by around 69% in 2022 (https://www.grandviewresearch.com). In the sample of this research, the proportion of women might be unrealistically high. On the contrary, the age structure is approximately similar. The age group of 19 – 40 years dominates the global nail salon market with 46% in 2022 (https://www.grandviewresearch.com), while in this sample, the age group of 18 – 34 years constitutes 51.9%

4. RESULTS

The statistical tool Jamovi 2.3.21 was used to analyze the collected empirical data. Non-users of nail salons were initially excluded from the analysis, leaving a sample of 297 respondents who identified themselves as current or former users of nail salons. ANOVA and independent sample tests were conducted to compare the results of nail salon users concerning demographic and other control variables. Statistically significant differences were found in certain variables concerning the age of respondents and the frequency of visits. However, within the context of this study, the focus was placed on differences established between 'own' users (of a studied nail care salon) and other users (31 out of 55 variables). For this reason, the CJM is presented separately (Tables 2 and 3 below) for 'own' users (N = 92) and 'other' users (N = 205).

Table 2. Customer Journey Map for 'Own' Users

	PRE-PURCHASE					
Stage	Awareness of the salon brand	Selection criteria for choosing a salon	Regularly seeking nail design ideas before visiting the salon	Method of scheduling appointments	Experience with online appointment booking	Potential improvements in the booking process
Activities	Salon selection			Appointment scheduling		
Thoughts / Feelings	Stimulating curiosity; Reducing insecurity		Entrusting to expertise; Approval	Time and care savings		
User Pains	Brand confusion; Risk of wrong choice		Reluctance to risk trying some new	Younger clients lack sufficient online options		Concerns about appoint. arrangement
Objectives	Promotion through influencers and social media	Reevaluate working hours (more time slots)	Attract more younger clients	Promote online booking channels		Digitalization; Working hours?
Situation	Word-of-mouth recommendation	76,1%	1. Service quality and staff expertise	40% fully agree or agree (43.3% among those aged 18-34), Average rating 3.11 (on a scale of 1-5)	SMS / WhatsApp / Viber	47,8%	38% have this experience (average rating 3.69 on a scale of 1-4)	Multiple appointments	3,60
	Regular client of the hair department	12,0%	2. Cleanliness and salon hygiene		Phone	33,7%		Introduction of the reminder system	3,54
	Following a favorite manicurist	7,6%	3. Appointment availability		Other	14,1%		Introduction of online reservations	3,39
	Through social media	2,2%	4. Quick and easy appointment reservation		Through social media	2,2%		Salon working hours	2,97
	Through internet searches	1,1%	5. Price and affordability		Through online system	2,2%		Faster response to reservations	2,96
	Proximity to the location	1,1%						(Scale 1 - 5)	
	Gift voucher	0,0%							
Touch-points	Social media/ Influencers	Working Hours	Appointment availability	Quality	Posting new nail designs on social media	Web applications	Social media	Appointment availability	Reminder application

Source: research

Table 2. Customer Journey Map for 'Own' Users – Continued

Stage	PURCHASE			POST-PURCHASE		
	Experience during the visit	Possible improvements during the visit	Satisfaction with the overall service	Possible improvements after the service is provided	Acceptable price/quality ratio	Willingness to pay for premium services
Activities	**Nail styling process**			**Usage**		
Thoughts / Feelings	Trust in the quality and expertise of the staff			Are clients satisfied; will they return; recommend the salon to others		
User Pains	:)	Location with more accessible parking?		Regular clients want to be rewarded		
Objectives	Maintain good client experiences			Building loyalty	Consider pricing levels	Offer premium services
Situation	Rated 3,76 (on a scale of 1-4)	Parking 3,40	Rated 4,78 (on a scale of 1-5)	Loyalty program/rewards for loyalty 3,84	Rated 4,65 (on a scale of 1-5)	Willing 65,2%
		Quick service 2,97		More affordable prices or special offers 3,24		Maybe, it depends 23,9%
		Greater choice of designs and colors 2,95				Not willing 10,9%
		More professional service 2,86				
		Higher level of hygiene and cleanliness 2,86				
		Better communication 2,67				
		(Scale 1 - 5)				
Touch-points	Experience	Parking — Fast service — Loyalty		Loyalty programs — Special offers — Prices — Premium services — Recommendations		

Source: research

Table 3. Customer Journey Map for Other Users

Stage	PRE-PURCHASE					
	Awareness of the salon brand	Selection criteria for choosing a salon	Regularly seeking nail design ideas before visiting the salon	Method of scheduling appointments	Experience with online appointment booking	Potential improvements in the booking process
Activities	Salon selection			Appointment scheduling		
Thoughts / Feelings	Stimulating curiosity; Reducing insecurity		Approval; experimentation	Time and care savings		
User Pains	Brand confusion; Risk of wrong choice		Willingness to take risks	Younger clients lack sufficient online options		Concerns about appoint. arrangement
Objectives	Social media promotion	Reevaluate pricing?	Retain younger clients	Enhance and promote online booking channels		Digitalization; Working hours?
Situation	Word-of-mouth recommendation — 68,6%	1. Service quality and staff expertise	63% fully agree or agree (68.8% among those aged 18-34) Average rating 3.62 (on a scale of 1-5)	SMS / WhatsApp / Viber — 39,2%	37.1% have this experience (rating of 3.28 on a scale of 1-4)	Multiple appointments — 3,50
	Through social media — 16,7%	2. Cleanliness and salon hygiene		Phone — 31,9%		Introduction of the reminder system — 3,41
	Internet searches — 6,4%	3. Price and affordability		Other — 13,7%		Introduction of online reservations — 3,29
	Regular client of the hair department — 2,9%	4. Quick and easy appointment reservation		Through social media — 11,8%		Faster response to reservations — 3,11
	Following a favorite manicurist — 2,9%	5. Appointment availability		Through online system — 3,4%		Working hours — 3,05
	Proximity to the location — 2,0%					(Scale 1 - 5)
	Gift voucher — 0,5%					
Touch-points	Social media	Online advertisements	Prices	Appointment availability	Posting new nail designs on social meda	Web applications	Social media	Online booking platform	Reminder application	Working hours

Source: research

Table 3. Customer Journey Map for Other Users – Continued

Stage	PURCHASE			POST-PURCHASE		
	Experience during the visit	Possible improvements during the visit	Satisfaction with the overall service	Possible improvements after the service is provided	Acceptable price/quality ratio	Willingness to pay for premium services
Activities	**Nail styling process**			**Usage**		
Thoughts / Feelings	Trust in the quality and expertise of the staff			Are clients satisfied; will they return; recommend the salon to others		
User Pains	:)	Location with more accessible parking?		Regular clients want to be rewarded		
Objectives	Maintain good client experiences			Building loyalty	Consider pricing levels	Offer premium services
Situation	Rated 3,46 (on a scale of 1-4)	Parking — 3,24	Rated 4,56 (on a scale of 1-5)	Loyalty program/rewards for loyalty — 3,66	Rated 4,18 (on a scale of 1-5)	Willing — 64,4%
		Quick service — 3,08		More affordable prices or special offers — 3,39		Maybe, it depends — 22,9%
		Greater choice of designs and colors — 3,06				Not willing — 12,7%
		More professional service — 3,06				
		Higher level of hygiene and cleanliness — 3,02				
		Better communication — 2,88				
		(Scale 1 - 5)				
Touch-points	Experience	Parking / Fast service / Choice of design and colors	Service	Loyalty programs / Special offers	Premium services / Affordable prices	Recommendations and repurchase

Source: research

The CJMs of the two user groups (Tables 2 and 3) provide an opportunity for a detailed insight into the current state and differences in perceptions between own and other nail salon users based on the empirical research results. In this regard, even minor differences can be observed in the perceptions of own and other users.

In the pre-purchase stage, which involves awareness and salon selection, differences are noticeable in terms of criteria, as price and availability rank fifth for own users and third for other users. Furthermore, own users are less inclined to pre-select nail designs (40% for own users vs. 63% for other users) and are less prone to taking risks in choosing something new. Such results can be attributed to the higher proportion of younger age groups (18-34 years) in the sample (mainly student population) that visit other nail salons, compared to the age structure of own clients.

In the purchase stage (service provision), differences (statistically insignificant) should be highlighted in terms of service experiences, where own users have a slightly better perception (average ratings of 3.76 vs. 3.46 for other users).

In the post-purchase stage, own users are more interested in loyalty programs and rewards (average 3.84 vs. 3.66), and they have fewer complaints about price levels and availability (3.24 vs. 3.39), resulting in higher satisfaction with the price-to-quality ratio (4.65 vs. 4.18).

5. DISCUSSION

CJM serves as a tool for visualizing the decision-making process from the customer's perspective before, during, and after purchasing a service. Therefore, researching customer perceptions of individual touchpoints and the overall customer journey through a questionnaire is an appropriate approach to gaining a realistic view of the current state and issues that need an upgrade or even a redefinition.

CJM, through a separate presentation of its users and other users, provides a helpful comparison with competing salons. In that sense, this paper partially follows the approach of Canfield and Basso (2017: 111), who analyzed the customer journey of three typical couples of restaurant visitors, following the significant differences in demographic characteristics. The comparison results are mostly positive for the case study nail salon, although this information is of secondary importance. The primary goal is to utilize the customer journey visualization from the customers' perspective to improve individual touchpoints and the overall journey further.

The comparison with global research outcomes may confirm the usability of the insights obtained from this research. Pandemic experiences in this industry are reflected in a shift towards ordering systems via online booking platforms and mobile apps. It simultaneously reduces crowd waiting times and better utilizes salon capacities. The millennial group also seeks self-expression and individuality through unique nail designs, colors, and embellishments. Many millennials seek out nail technicians who can create customized and intricate nail art (https://www.grandviewresearch.com). This research also points to the lack of online options (primarily for younger users) and the need to introduce online booking channels. The same applies to the inclination of younger users towards experimenting with new nail designs

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The post-pandemic era brings new challenges and requires service providers to align their processes with potentially permanently altered customer expectations and habits. This task can be quite demanding, especially for small and micro businesses that, despite traditional shortcomings in entrepreneurial and managerial capabilities, must keep up with the pace set by leading global companies, thus shaping consumer experiences, especially those of the younger generation.

In this context, a data-based diagnostic contained in the CJM approach can significantly assist in identifying events that influence consumer frustrations or satisfaction. It also connects customer experiences with specific operational points in the customer journey, required time, or employee interactions. Ultimately, it facilitates the understanding of potential break points in the customer journey (Duncan et al., 2016: 34). Despite some limitations, CJM in this study provides a solid foundation for improving the nail salon's services that served as a case study.

A lack of a more comprehensive investigation into consumers' inclination to recommend their experiences to other existing or potential consumers (either through online or traditional word-of-mouth) was observed regarding future enhancements of this consumer journey research approach.

Additionally, it would be interesting to explore how employee commitment impacts consumer experience, and incorporating theoretical perspectives such as service-dominant (S-D) logic into the study of the consumer experience phenomenon could also yield valuable insights.

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