Social interactions as drivers of customers’ service experiences

by

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Abstract
Social interactions are an important driver of customer service experiences, especially regarding interaction-intensive services where customers actively participate as co-creators of their experience in the physical environment of the service firm. In contrast to earlier research in services and marketing where customers are regarded as passive receivers of a service, the present study addresses social interactions as drivers and customers as active contributors to their experiences. The aim of this study is to analyse and portray the contents and importance of social interactions in customer restaurant experiences, and the role they play as a driver of customer service experiences as described by customers in their own words – the voice of the customer. A Critical Incident Technique study was conducted and data was analysed applying constant comparative principles. The results provide a detailed description, analysis and categorisation of social interactions as drivers occurring throughout the service process. The dynamic role of social interactions, involved throughout the service process is illustrated.

Keywords – Social interactions, experience drivers, customer service experience, restaurant experience, service process, satisfiers and dissatisfiers.

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Introduction
Service firms create experiences together with their customers (Vargo and Lush, 2004). In a quest to strengthen companies’ competitiveness, customer experiences are becoming more and more important as they involve customers cognitively (Cronin, 2003), emotionally (Edvardsson, 2005) and behaviourally (Johnston and Clark, 2005). This is especially important in interaction-intensive and experience-based services, which are the focus of the present study, with customers and employees involved in co-creation of their experiences. Social interactions, activities and processes (Grönroos, 2002) are crucial in services in general (Parasuraman et al., 1985, Bitner et al., 1990, Arnould and Price, 1993, Echeverri, 1999, Grönroos, 2008); and are identified as a frequent driver of customers’ restaurant experiences (Walter et al., 2010). Social interactions occur when actors interact in the physical service environment, as verbal and non-verbal communication (Echeverri, 1999). For service firms it is important to know more about the role social interactions play for customers in different stages of the service experience (Carù and Cova, 2007, p 6) and in which way these contribute to customer service experiences in interactions with other customers and resources.

Extensive research has been undertaken in examining how customers perceive service quality, with social interactions included as a part of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1985, Cronin and Taylor, 1992). This stream of studies focuses on how customers expect and perceive the service quality offered, by applying the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, and describe customers’ ratings of general service quality dimensions determined in advance. Earlier CIT studies (Bitner et al., 1990, Nyquist et al., 1985) examined employee and customer experiences of interactions. These studies focus on specific interactions and exemplify their categories on an aggregated level, with short descriptions of isolated events and behaviours causing satisfaction and dissatisfaction. However, what happens when customers participate in the service process including continuous social interactions and the meaning the experienced service has for customers (Verhoef et al., 2009, Schneider and White, 2004, Cronin, 2003) is only examined in a few empirical studies (for example, Arnould and Price, 1993, Echeverri, 1999, Olsen, 1992, Hansen et al., 2005, Carù and Cova, 2007). The fact that customers always are active co-creators of their experience (Vargo and Lush, 2004, Grönroos, 2008) puts a strong focus on the social and physical components of the customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2009). Some scholars, focusing on dyadic interactions, extraordinary experiences and how customers experience the servicescape apply thoughts of social science (Arnould and Price, 1993, Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999, Solomon et al., 1985, Carù and Cova, 2007). The use of, for example, social construction or role theory in these studies facilitates a better understanding of social interactions and how customers create meaning of their experiences. In these studies the functional and more objective view on customer experiences is extended to an experiential and subjective view on customers.
The discussion above shows that social interactions as a part of customer service experience play an important role. There is empirical work on customer experiences and there have been intensive theoretical discussions about the customer’s active involvement in creating their experiences. However, it could be stated that there is still a need for research moving from a functional and static view regarding the customer as a receiver of ready-to-consume experience packages to a dynamic view on customers who themselves shape their experiences throughout a process of interactions (Chase, 1981, Bitran et al., 2008, Verhoef et al., 2009). This is especially important in contact-intensive services, such as restaurants, where customers are present and actively involved during the whole service process in the creation of their experience. The starting point of this study is to explore social interactions in the service process from the customer perspective, by focusing on dynamic aspects and the meaning social interactions have for customers. Therefore the aim of this study is to analyse and portray the content and importance of social interactions in customer service experiences, and the role they play as a driver of customer service experiences, as described by customers in their own words – the voice of the customer.

In the next section we present definitions, the perspective and the theoretical framework of the study. Thereafter the methodology of the empirical study is explained, followed by the results section. Finally the results, the research contributions and managerial implications will be discussed and suggestions for further research will be made.

Definitions and the perspective of the study
The common denominator of this study is social interactions that arise during customer service experiences which result in favourable or unfavourable customer experiences. In this section central terms will be defined – customer service experience and drivers – and the basic perspective of the study is presented.

In this article a service experience is defined as the customer’s direct and indirect experience of the service process, the organisation, and the physical facilities and how the customer interacts with the service firm’s representatives and other customers. These in turn create the customer’s cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses and leave the customer with memories about the experience (for an extensive discussion see Walter et al., 2010). Further, a customer experience is seen as occurring in a commercial and social service context, and is therefore regarded as being shaped and offered by a service company which has a commercial purpose. Customers want to satisfy their needs and to pay for them. In restaurants the buying of a meal, the eating and being served, the social interactions with employees and other customers, and the guests’ feelings are not separable. These activities happen continuously until guests leave the restaurant, and when they finally have paid and left the restaurant, what remains are memories about the experience. Thus, the customer’s service process experience and the perception of the outcome of the service experience at restaurants (Johnston and Clark, 2005, pp 7-10) are inseparable.
Drivers are defined as mechanisms that evoke and direct customer experiences, they can interact with other drivers and they are always to be found in the world of the customer. However, the same elements described as drivers could also be described as elements of the customer service experience where the physical environment is a part of, but then they are just static preconditions (compare with the thoughts of goods dominant logic (Vargo and Lush, 2004, Grönroos, 2008)), sending signals to the customers. For the customer only some of the elements or cues, depending on the specific situation, become drivers.

**Value creation and customer service experiences**

Services are co-created when customers interact either with employees, other customers or with tangibles such as the food and beverages served and the physical environment. As discussed within marketing and the perspective of service dominant logic (SDL) (Vargo and Lush, 2004, Gummesson, 2008, Grönroos, 2008, Vargo and Lush, 2008) co-creation of value occurs when operant resources (skills and knowledge about how to do things) act on other operant resources or on operand resources (goods and physical resources). The result then is value in use, (or value-in-context), expressed in a customer’s individual experience, judged by the customer in the customer’s own processes and activities (Vargo and Lush, 2004, Normann and Ramirez, 1994, Holbrook, 1994). In addition regarding customers as active co-creators of their own service experiences changes their role from being seen as an external resource (Hunt and Morgan, 1995) to whom something is done by the service firm, to being seen as someone who does something actively during service co-creation with the firm.

Customers and representatives of the service company act as resource integrators (Baron and Harris, 2008, Vargo and Lush, 2006, Payne et al., 2008) by actively using their personal resources in varying degrees. These are described, as already mentioned, operant resources or knowledge and skills (Vargo and Lush, 2004). Thus resource integration could be described as the dynamic part of value creation, when resources are linked together through customer-employee interactions, which means social interactions. The type of interactions vary throughout different stages of the service process (Berthon and Joby, 2006). The static part of value creation could be described as the preconditions offered by a service firm – the resource constellation.

**Theoretical framing**

In this section a theoretical framework that supports the understanding and interpretations of social interactions as a driver of customer service experiences will be presented. The theoretical framework describes the service process and social interactions as a part of service experiences from a social construction point of view and different types of social interactions.

**The service process**

Interaction-intensive services are characterised by the high amount of customer contact points, which are sources for individuals to form perceptions and judgements throughout
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the service process (Chase, 1981). When customers have a sense of control over the service process they are less likely to complain and it is more important how well the service ends, not how well it starts (Chase, 2004). The latter is in accordance with the recency effect of impressions, which tells us that impressions from the end of an activity are easier to remember (Carlson et al., 2004, Passer and Smith, 2004). On the other hand the primacy effect, which means that first impressions are most impactful and enduring, has not the same impact on an individual’s total impression according to Kahneman (2000). By applying these principles, Bitran et al. (2008) state that it is important to find out more about how customers subdivide the service process in their minds. Accordingly Verhoef et al. (2009) recommend applying a more holistic view concerning the process and time of customer experience, but also including experiences that occur before and after the guest’s interaction in the restaurant.

Social interactions

Social interactions among guests and employees occur through a verbal and non-verbal social process aiming at shared knowledge, experience and thoughts (Echeverri, 1999, Sommers et al., 1989). The focus in this study will be on social interactions remembered and told by customers. In restaurant experiences for example the meaning of action for the participants emerges from social interactions with others and with themselves (Flint, 2006), through an interpretive process where meaning is socially constructed by the participants. Social construction theories are tools to interpret and to increase the understanding of the human sense making activities (Giddens, 1984, Berger and Luckmann, 1991, Goffman, 1959). Fundamental concepts of social construction theories are social structures, social systems, position, role and social interactions. The role is “a cluster of social cues that guide and direct an individual’s behaviour in a given setting” (Solomon et al., 1985, p 102). In role-taking the individual is imagining the world from the point of view of the other. Adopting roles creates special behaviours and thus expectations on these roles (Goffman, 1959, Solomon et al., 1985, Charon, 2009). The other’s reaction may be interpreted as the clue for what we interpret he or she is thinking and what we are able to interpret how he or she feels (Charon, 2009). Roles are connected with role scripts (Broderick, 1999) which are behaviour patterns or learned sequences of causal chains (Solomon et al., 1985) containing information on the expected behaviour on oneself and the other. In restaurants for example, this means guests’ expectations of the employees playing the role as a host, and employees expectations on customers as guests. The term ‘position’ refers to a person’s socially defined position relative to others in the setting, for example a waiter, a headwaiter, a restaurant manager, the owner or a chef at a restaurant (Solomon et al., 1985). These positions in their turn are associated with special roles and behaviours (action), leading to expectations (ibid). Imagine a person visiting a restaurant together with some business guests. The person acts as a host towards his/her guests and at the same time the person supposes that the headwaiter and his waiting employees are interested in and take care of the person and her guests, by playing the role of being their host. Social structures are unobservable rules and resources that directly influence social interactions (Giddens, 1984), they control action and are reproduced by action at the same time. They could be distinguished through individuals’ use of interpretative
schemes and semantic rules in order to understand the meaning (signification) of texts and dialogues, which is especially important concerning social interactions as a part of restaurant services. Further, individuals seek to reproduce the balance of power when resources are unequally distributed (domination). In restaurant services the question of power is particularly important as the one who is in power unilaterally determines what is going to happen (Bitran and Hoech, 1990, Mars and Nicod, 1984). When a person acts upon others their behaviour is evaluated, based on the evaluating person’s social norms and values. In this way the structure of moral rules (legitimation) are reproduced. Social systems are empirically observable systems caused by the unobservable structures and the social systems only exist as long as they are reproduced by individuals (Giddens, 1984).

Customer-customer and customer-employee interactions
Customer-employee interactions are well represented in research, whereas customer-customer interactions receive less attention, however they could be important because of the unpredictable effect they can have (Verhoef et al., 2009, Wu, 2008), particularly in a restaurant context as described by (Lugosi, 2008). Guests also interact with other guests while waiting at the bar to be seated or after being seated if the seating encourages contact between them and guests can disturb each other through talking too loud or just being seated too close. Further, they can voluntarily assist and support other guests (and the service organisation) through their advice and thus contribute to other customers (and also their own) favourable experience (Verhoef et al., 2009) by acting as strangers, as friends and as quasi-friends (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007).

Empirical context and research methodology
We selected restaurants as the empirical context, since restaurants services are used by a large number of persons and restaurant guests are present at the restaurant for a while and close interpersonal interactions between customers and employees occur in the physical environment during the service process (Schneider and White, 2004). Customer-employee interactions are often described by using the roles of host and guest. The behaviour of a host - hospitable behaviour - could be described “through feelings of generosity, a desire to please, and a genuine regard for the guest as an individual” (Lashley, 2000). As discussed earlier in this paper there is only little empirical research focusing on the dynamic and meaning of social interactions in service experiences. Therefore examining interaction-intensive restaurant services could add new insights, which could be helpful in the design of service experiences.

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) according to Flanagan’s (1954) principles was applied because the method is useful to describe a “real world phenomenon based on thorough understanding” (Grove and Fisk, 1997, p 67, Olsen, 1992). Short narratives (Czarniawska, 2004, pp 43-44) were collected by personal interviews about customers’ favourable and unfavourable restaurant experiences. In this study, 122 interviews were carried out and 195 narratives collected. All interviews were conducted in Swedish by the first author in natural restaurant environments (Miles and Huberman, 2007, p 10), at
three different places where it was possible to contact a great number of persons to be interviewed. The interviews lasted from a few minutes to 20 minutes and each contained between one and five critical incidents. 19 interviews were unusable and 65 interviewees did not want to join the study. From a gender perspective, half of the respondents were men and half were women. Most of the interviewees, 83 per cent, were between 31 and 65 years old, 11 per cent were between 18 and 30 and 5 percent of them were older than 65. Concerning the frequency of eating out, 52 per cent of the interviewees stated that they eat out more than twice a week, 42 per cent more than twice a month and 4 per cent less than twice per month. The questions asked followed the recommendations of Stauss (1993, p 412). The incidents were remembered and finally recalled in the interview situation. The interviews do not includes all the details that happened in a situation, but rather events or episodes that made differences for the interviewees as restaurant guests. Criteria were set up for the interviews to be included in the dataset.

The data collected was then analysed in an inductive manner according to constant comparative principles. Eight main categories emerged. Then the drivers were analysed in each narrative, as they were described by the interviewees. The analysis resulted in eight main categories of frequent and less frequent drivers of customers’ favourable and unfavourable experiences (Walter et al., 2010). The frequent drivers are social interactions (guest-guest and guest-employee interactions), the core service (food and beverages) and the physical environment of the restaurant. Social interactions are the main focus of the present paper.

During this analysis the process of the restaurant experience was also mapped out, as the narratives also referred to different stages of a restaurant experience, which is illustrated in the following extract.

... when we came into the restaurant, they placed us better than they had planned from the beginning, ... and then ... when we looked at the menu, ... when the food was served and they poured something in our glasses. .. They kindly asked whether the food tasted good. (A10)

The narratives were reread and the main categories were related to the different stages. The narratives are different in detail and do not refer to all stages. The frequencies for every category and stage were arranged in a frequency table for both favourable and unfavourable experiences. The results of this part of the analysis reveal the main categories involved in the different stages, remembered by the interviewees.

The meaning and role of social interactions in different stages
In the next step the role of social interaction was further examined and interpreted by means of the theoretical framework. Moreover, the interpretations described in the results section will be further challenged by applying Oliver’s (1997) discussion of need categories.
Credibility
We kept the research process and strategy transparent for the reader by introducing a research gap, showing from which theoretical concepts interpretations were made and by describing the research method. The use of CIT worked well to collect a great number of short narratives about customer experiences within a reasonable time, and it also facilitated a rich description of the results, which is in accordance with Olsen (1992). More favourable experiences than unfavourable were remembered and told (see also Johnston, 1995), which could be due to the pleasurable character of restaurant services.

Data analysis was performed on a detailed level and in an interpretive way, as recommended by Gremler (2004). The analysis was assessed by two additional judges from different research backgrounds. Overall there was a good agreement between the judges and the first author; different views were discussed until agreement was reached. The qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA was used to support the process of analysis. The interviews were pretested and closeness to the data was maintained as the first author conducted all interviews, transcribed the data and worked with the analysis. The type of restaurants, where the interviews were conducted, are only represented in a small number of incidents, however they could be regarded as a type of stimulus for the interviewees to get started.

By working with social interactions it became obvious that a social constructive view on reality will be helpful to gain a deeper understanding of the data, accordingly a basic assumption of this study is that reality and meaning is socially constructed through social interactions between individuals.

Results
Firstly, the occurrence of social interactions together with the core service and the physical environment in different stages of the customer experience will be described. Thereafter the different roles guests and employees play in social interactions at restaurants are presented and then social interactions as drivers and the meaning these have for customers is described. Finally we present a categorisation of social interactions as drivers.

Social interactions in different stages of service experiences at restaurants
A visit to a restaurant takes some time; it may be a short lunch, a business dinner or a family event which may continue for hours. During the service process guests are involved in numerous interactions with other guests and with employees – waiters and chefs for example – and with the food and beverages served (the core service). Almost all interactions happen in the physical environment of the restaurant. The stages of guests' restaurant experiences that emerged in the data are before arriving to the restaurant, at the beginning of the stay, while eating, at the end of the stay and after the stay at the restaurant. Most important, by referring to their frequency of occurrence, are the stages occurring while the guests are present at the restaurant – at the beginning of
the stay, while eating, at the end of the stay. The stages, before and after the stay, show a low frequency for social interactions. The stages and frequencies of occurrence of the social interactions, the core service and the physical environment are arranged in Table 1.

Social interactions before arrival in favourable cases occur when guests for example take a walk to the restaurant with their guests, when they make personal reservations at the restaurant or reservations by phone. Social interactions after the guests have left the restaurant occur when they meet others and tell them about their favourable or unfavourable experiences, so called word of mouth, or when people meet again sometime after they visited a restaurant together and talk about this common or extraordinary restaurant experience they still remember. The social interactions before and after the stay at a restaurant occur outside the restaurant facility and are most often not under control of the restaurant company. During the stay guests talk to each other, have a dialogue with employees, look at the menu, enjoy the pleasantness of the environment both inside and outside, sometimes they have a dialogue with the kitchen staff and in between these interactions they eat and drink and talk. Overall guests are actively involved in social interactions in all stages including before the stay and also after the stay.

The results show that social interactions occur together with other resources (the core service and the physical environment) in all stages of guests’ favourable and unfavourable restaurant experiences. These resources together represent the resource constellation in every stage of the process. This indicates that social interactions are available for customers and can be turned into drivers, in continuous interactions with other resources and drivers. Regarding guests as resource integrators, the material indicates that most often the interaction between different resources is connected by social interactions in a dynamic process. In the stage before and after the stay, the guest is the resource integrator and employees are only involved when guests make reservations, personally at the restaurant or by telephone. In the other stages resource integration involves employees, all guests and/or other resources in a dynamic interplay.

Table 1  The occurrence of social interactions, the core service and the physical environment - the resource constellation - in different stages of the service process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main categories/Stages</th>
<th>Before arrival</th>
<th>At the beginning of the stay</th>
<th>While eating</th>
<th>At the end of the stay</th>
<th>After the stay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pos/neg Social interactions</td>
<td>3/1</td>
<td>72/29</td>
<td>133/75</td>
<td>6/14</td>
<td>8/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pos/neg The core service</td>
<td>2/0</td>
<td>26/8</td>
<td>143/75</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pos/neg the Physical environment</td>
<td>9/2</td>
<td>26/5</td>
<td>113/22</td>
<td>2/2</td>
<td>1/0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The roles of guests and employees in social interactions

Guests go to a restaurant with friends, or with their family, to celebrate something or for business purposes for example. The narratives show that people almost always go out together; there are only very few narratives where guests visits the restaurant alone, however even single guests are co-customers and interact with other guests and employees. This implies that there are different actors at the restaurant - the guest, employees or other representatives of the restaurant and other guests, each playing different roles during the process of a restaurant experience. The roles refer to different behaviour patterns and thus lead to expectations on the person, holding a certain role. As an underlying basis there is the consumer-provider role showing that all restaurant experiences are business relations from the beginning; the customer has a purpose to consume a service which is provided by a restaurant, for which he or she pays a certain price, except when restaurant guests are invited by their firm or when they are staying at a conference. Then they do not have any business relationship with the restaurant as they themselves do not pay for their stay, but they still are guests at a restaurant. Additionally the most important role, from which guests’ expectations arise, is the employee as a waiter referring to their professional skills and their role as a host, which in its turn refers to their behaviour towards guests.

Guests could also be a host to their business or private guests or, for a while, a host to some other guests who are strangers to them. Every customer role has a corresponding employee role, as they are interrelated through social interactions. It could be stated that employees act as hosts only in favourable cases. Unfavourable narratives show what makes guests feel badly treated without any warmth, and thus do not refer to the characteristics of hospitable behaviour (Lashley, 2000). In the stage after the stay guests can act as marketers of the restaurant firm, by telling others about their experiences, both in a favourable and unfavourable way. Other roles that restaurant guests could play during their stay at the restaurant are bridegroom, colleague, and friend and conference guest. When they have their children with them they also act as a parent some time.

Social interactions as drivers of customer restaurant experiences

First social interactions as drivers are presented in Table 2, arranged with their frequency of occurrence in favourable and unfavourable experiences. In total social interactions as drivers occur most frequently in guest-employee interactions and favourable experiences dominate. Guest-guest interactions as drivers are most often remembered as favourable experiences and could be described as unexpected events. Complaint and recovery situations most often lead to unfavourable experiences.
Table 2 Social interactions as drivers of customers’ favourable and unfavourable experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social interaction as drivers of restaurant guests’ favourable and unfavourable experiences</th>
<th>Favourable Freq</th>
<th>Unfavourable Freq</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guest-employee interactions</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest-guest interactions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaint and recovery situations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guests overall perception of service quality</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eating out at a restaurant is expected to be a pleasurable experience

When eating out guests always expect a positive experience. At the restaurant guests want to be treated fairly and with respect. They want to enjoy their stay, which often means something special for them compared with the everyday situations at home, and they really are happy visit a restaurant. However, when guests arrive these expectations are not always met. “You go out, you are happy and positive, you want to enjoy yourself and don’t want the evening to be destroyed by a restaurant experience and incompetent restaurant employees…” (N39). In several cases guests felt badly and nonchalantly treated by employees. A female guest was even provoked to ask whether the waiter was in a bad mood. Thereafter she had a bad conscience and the employee continued with his nonchalant behaviour. Some restaurants evoke negative expectations from the beginning (before guests arrive there) because of the food quality served, however due to the lack of choice, guests sometimes have to choose the restaurant.

Social interactions invoked by employee behaviour, such as being kind, friendly and pleasant waiting staff tends to lead to favourable experiences. Favourable employee behaviour could compensate for bad quality of the core service, but not vice versa.

- “... What we got was so-so at the end, it was a wedding luncheon, it took longtime between everything they served, sometimes I had to get in eye contact with the waiting employees, then they understood that it was time to speed up. They also made some mistakes, they served coffee for some guests, then coffee was running short and some persons did not get coffee at all ... What made up for every mistake was the headwaiter, who was responsible for our group. He was an enormously pleasant person, very positive and helpful ... so therefore I was, after all, quite satisfied because he was so enormously pleasant. But how everything worked with his staff during our stay was not a great experience. (N39)

Perceived negative employee behaviour, such as employees with a nonchalant attitude or employees who question guests’ behaviour, leads to unfavourable experiences because of social interactions developing in a negative way.

Guests want be in control over the service process

The narratives indicate that there is a kind of battle between waiting employees and guests concerning the question of control and power throughout all stages. In unfavourable narratives it is apparent that guests were not able to control the situation, however sometimes they try or are able to control their stay at a restaurant. In some cases guests know the owners or a waiter personally or they make a personal reservation at the restaurant, which makes them feel that they get what they want and that they can relax when they are at the restaurant. Situations where guests feel they
have no control are when waiters try to give orders to them, for example when waiters tell them that they have to tip or when guests have been wrongly seated, or when they are badly treated. Then the experience turns unfavourable. Customers want to know when and why the kitchen is delayed and food takes more time to be served than is appropriate. “There was very bad information about why the food did not come.” (A78)

Other situations illustrate when guests make their own decisions and thus diverge from what they are supposed to do, service employees are not enthusiastic and thus could react. Guests in their turn do not like it, when they are told off by employees because they felt that their decision was right in that moment.

-There was nobody to welcome us, so we decided to take a seat at a table and waited to be served. After some minutes a guy came, gave us the menus and the first thing he said was, next time you wait at the door... Bad service I don’t pay for. (N14)

When employees tell guests what they are allowed to combine or not, guests feel that they don’t get what they want. They want do make their own decisions.

-We were at XY, they were kind until we ordered coffee and ice cream to be consumed at the same time, and we got the coffee first and the ice cream afterwards. They have read a book about how to conduct oneself at a restaurant. You treat your guests like this. I don’t care I want to drink coffee and eat ice cream at the same time. (N32)

When customers feel that they are involved in the service process they feel that they get what they want. In a restaurant without a menu, employees come and sit down with their guests at their table and discuss what they shall eat and drink. These close interactions with employees make guests feel personally, pleasantly and exclusively treated. Guests feel involved when employees, through their knowledge and skills, create learning situations and tell them about the meal and wine combinations, and most often these interactions direct the experience in a favourable direction. However the narratives also show that the “lectures”, held by waiting employees sometimes are too much and make guests feel that the interaction with the employee was not as authentic as it was during earlier visits at the same restaurant and thus makes guests feel disappointed.

-... I have been there several times and they are not so good anymore. Personally I like when they inform their guests about what the meal contains, but I don’t want to have a whole lecture when I want to eat at a restaurant, this feels artificial, especially when there is a lot of non ordinary staff who learnt everything by heart, and they don’t really know what they talk about, they just repeat things... I got disappointed ... (A14)

Guest-employee interactions at restaurants with different types of self-service concepts were described by several interviewees as very favourable and made them feel that they are a part of their experience creation. Guests’ interactions with the chefs and also with tangible elements in the restaurant environment while serving themselves and while paying, made them feel that they get what they want. For example guests’ involvement (at a seafood restaurant) by serving themselves by means of remote boats was described as very favourable. The remote boats were especially interesting for the guest’s children, as they were allowed to direct the boats and thus were kept busy, while their parents could finish their meal. The children in their turn could also interact with other children. To conclude the involvement of the children through driving the remote boats facilitated the meal experience for their parents. An interviewee described his experience from a casual self-service restaurant where the kitchen and the restaurant part are merged together and guests interact with chefs while ordering and
waiting for their food. These interactions make guests feel involved. While waiting the
guest was able to observe how his food was prepared, which made him feel being a
part of the team in the kitchen. At the same time he had some control over how the food
is cooked. The fact that this lunch took very long time had no influence on the guest’s
positive experience.

- I had to queue, then it was my turn and I ordered, then they prepared the food in front of my eyes. And they asked would you like
garlic, would you like parsley, then they cooked everything, I could observe. I was standing in the kitchen so to say, and then I got
the food. It was very good. On the other hand it took very long time, which I knew before. It was very funny because it was different.
I felt that they really tried to make me feel that I got exactly what I wanted. (N19)

The numerous complaint and recovery situations should also be mentioned. When
guests complain and their complaint is met with respect and with the right recovery
offerings, they tend to be satisfied and to be in control of the situation and vice versa.
The narratives show that to make a complaint is not a pleasurable situation for a guest.
They are often badly handled by employees and/or the management and thus the guest
experience could not be turned to be favourable. However, often guests do not
complain at the restaurant; they use their power after the stay and tell others about their
bad experiences.

Unexpected events
When unexpected events are coming up, guests are surprised, the events lead to
interactions with other guests and most often their reaction is extremely positive.
Unexpected events occur when guests are on their way to a restaurant and, for
example, use a shaky elevator, which makes them feel that they have chosen the wrong
restaurant, when employees unexpectedly are proactive and recommend a special
food-wine combination which in addition fits the guests’ preferences perfectly or when
employees help guests with their children. Guests can influence other guests through
their presence and their behaviour and makes guests interact with one another. An
interviewee described that they were spontaneously singing together with other guests
at a restaurant. They felt that their singing was not so good and thus decided to sing
too. This event was the most important during the whole evening.

- They have pleasant employees: we had a good meal and a pleasant atmosphere throughout the whole evening. .... At the table
next to us ... they also had a birthday child at their table. They started to sing a song for him, and we thought that it did not sound so
good, so all of us sitting at our table started to sing too ... it was really an exceptional evening. (A81)

The personality and behaviour of the waiting employees is important for guests’
experiences and could make them feel that a restaurant experience is fascinating. An
older waitress, of about sixty years got her guests to enjoy the style of how she acted.
She took over the whole direction of the evening of her guests and made all decisions
for them. This behaviour could also be perceived as very unfavourable, however in this
case it was described as a very favourable experience for both the guests and their host
due to the waitress’s behaviour being accepted as professional.

- I never will forget this lady (an older waitress), I never will forget her way of acting, it was not - I would like to recommend to you, it
was more - I don’t think you should have whiskey with your coffee, I think you should have dark rum. My guests tried to say no, but
she succeeded in talking them into drinking dark rum. The rum was fantastic. She took over all decisions at our table. She knew
exactly how to treat us, probably because of her long experience. It was a very positive dinner, the style in which she treated my
French gentlemen guests, how she bossed them about. She knew what she did. We will never forget this lady, none of us ... it was
so fascinating to watch her. (A31)
Customers can decide to take the role of a host for other guests for a while, because they feel that other guests have been treated badly.

- …Usually the employees at XY are very professional. But once there was a little misunderstanding between some foreign guests and an employee. She told them off and … I thought you can’t tell off your guests. The guests tried to explain, but she just told them off. She could have done this in a better way. You don’t tell off your guests like this. Then I myself tried to manage the situation with the foreign guests … (C2)

A categorisation of social interactions as drivers

By further examining the favourable and unfavourable narratives different patterns emerged. By referring to Oliver’s (1997) discussion of need categories, which in its turn is based on Herzberg’s theory of motivation and hygiene factors social interactions as drivers will be categorised. A similar categorisation shows Kano’s (1984) model of attractive quality. The categories show that the negative experiences not always are the counterpart of the positive experiences, which means that satisfaction and no satisfaction and dissatisfaction and no dissatisfaction are the four categories. In addition there is a category of satisfiers which leads to both positive and negative experiences. Social interactions as drivers leading both to positive and negative experiences are bivalent drivers, for example quick/slow service, skilled/unskilled employees. Social interactions leading to dissatisfaction when they are missing and to no dissatisfaction or no extreme satisfaction, when they are included are called monovalent unfavourable drivers. The elements leading to these kinds of experiences are mostly tangibles (not considered in this paper) but also social interactions as drivers for example when guests feel that communication with employees is missing, or when guests feel that there is irregular staff working. When there is communication it is probably acceptable, but does not lead to extreme satisfaction. Social interactions leading to extreme satisfaction and no satisfaction when they are missing are called monovalent favourable drivers. Social interactions leading to extreme satisfaction are unexpected events and customers’ involvement in the service process.

Because of the use of CIT in this study only very positive and very negative experiences were collected, and thus the narratives could not be placed within the zone of indifference. The different categories illustrate what type of social interactions lead to delight and surprise, dissatisfaction or no dissatisfaction and which drivers could lead both to positive and negative experiences.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to analyse and portray the content and importance of social interactions in customer restaurant experiences, and the role they play as a driver of customer service experiences, as described by customers in their own words – the voice of the customer.

The study is based upon the view that reality is socially constructed and meaning is socially created in social interactions and that customers are active co-creators of their experiences. By focusing on social interactions as one important driver of customers’ restaurant experiences the customers’ roles and their participation in the service process could be described. In the following sections the results will be discussed by focusing on the empirical contributions of this study compared with other empirical
Empirical contributions

Compared with earlier empirical studies of customer service experiences (Bitner et al., 1990, Nyquist et al., 1985, Hansen et al., 2005) but also in the field of culinary arts (Tucci and Talaga, 2000, Andersson and Mossberg, 2004, Correia et al., 2008, Kivela et al., 2000) the results of the present study contribute to a deeper understanding of social interactions as a dynamic driver of customer experiences, favourable and unfavourable, in an interaction-intensive service context - the restaurant setting. This is in contrast to Hansen et al.’s (2005) grounded theory study about customers meal experiences. In line with the purpose of their study they describe customer experiences of social aspects as categories and very briefly. Thus they do not consider the dynamics of how customers experience social interactions.

Further, compared to earlier studies the results illustrate that customers not only enjoy what they are offered, they make something more out of the social interactions that occur throughout the service process. Guests decide that they don’t like the “lectures” given by the employees because they seem to be learned by heart, other guests like these presentations because these make them feel that employees are interested in them as guests. Guests’ involvement in the service process has different meanings for them, and they decide what these interactions mean for them in the specific situation. Social interactions don’t occur in isolation, they always happen in interaction with other resources which was illustrated by the resource constellation in different stages of the service process. In addition, social interactions also occur before arrival and after guests have left; persons who interact because they arrive in a shaky elevator or customers who tell others about their favourable or unfavourable experiences after their stay at a restaurant for example. Finally a categorisation of social interactions as drivers is presented for both favourable and unfavourable experiences. The categorisation shows that there are different dimensions of social interactions as drivers. Some of them only lead to extremely positive experiences, some only could reach basic satisfaction, however when they are missing they lead to extremely unfavourable experiences. Some of them could lead to both. Therefore not all of them can be treated in the same way.

Only a few other empirical studies in the field of service research and marketing examined customer experiences as a whole including the service process (for example Arnould and Price, 1993, Echeverri, 1999, Olsen, 1992). In order to better understand underlying patterns of customer service experiences both favourable and unfavourable experiences were studied as recommended by Arnould and Price (1993) and a social construction approach was applied to better understand social interactions as drivers. This led to a deeper understanding of social interactions in their context; and the guests’ active role in social interactions could be made observable.
Theoretical contributions
The extracts from narratives show clearly that social interactions do not occur in isolation, rather they could be described as a resource linking together the other resources involved (this is visible in the extracts presented in the results section, for example other actors' knowledge and skills and the core service or the physical environment). In this sense the present study contributes to the discussions of service dominant logic (Vargo and Lush, 2004). However, it should be mentioned that customers as active co-creators are active on different levels, from being an active part integrated into the service system to being a guest sitting and just interacting with employees, but still making their own decisions.

Summary of the research contributions
Finally, by referring to the aim of this study we can conclude that this study contributes to a better understanding of social interactions as dynamic drivers of customer service experiences in their context. Through the focus on the service process, social interactions as drivers, customers as active creators of their experience and the categorisation of social interactions as drivers, the paper contributes to earlier research in services and marketing. Through the focus on customer experiences and regarding the customer as an actor in the centre of interactions and the descriptions and illustrations of social interactions as drivers, the study makes a contribution to SDL (Vargo and Lush, 2004).

Managerial contributions
The descriptions of social interactions as drivers in different stages of the process, the roles and the meaning these have for restaurant guests show that social interactions are a complex phenomenon, to be handled by service firms. They are offered to customers most often as a part of a service offering. However customers turn them into drivers, for example when they like a female waitress's dominant behaviour or when parents enjoy that their children are kept busy by remote boats while they enjoy their meal. The categorisation of social interactions as drivers shows that all social interactions should not be treated in the same way. Managers of service firms should not only try to improve satisfying elements of customer experiences, but also keep an eye on social interactions leading to dissatisfaction.

Limitations of the study and further research
Our findings have some limitations. Due to the method used only exceptional experiences are reported by the interviewees - not everyday experiences and thus experiences within the zone of indifference were not considered. The grade of criticality of the experiences has not been examined further, which means that the criticality told by the interviewees was accepted. The incidents collected show a great variation, even though not all of them could be assessed as being very critical for the relationship between customers and restaurants, some of them would not be critical at all for us, but have been so for the interviewees. This shows that we are all different. In addition, only a Swedish context was studied. However due to the number of incidents collected, the broad and varying background of interviewees, a solid theoretical basis and the open presentation of details about the process of the study, we consider the findings to be
applicable in other service contexts, especially other parts of the hospitality industry. Due to the careful description of details from this study, readers (practitioners and researchers) are able to find out for themselves the extent to which the results could be applied in their special context (Kvale, 2004). Another limitation could be that CIT, criticised for not taking the process character of services into consideration, was the only method used. A combined methodology with observations or using a video-based method to film the customers in real service processes could have strengthened the results. Finally, studying restaurant experiences from more than one actor’s perspective - the customer - could give a more complete picture of the forces influencing social interactions. Studying other drivers, for example the physical environment and the core service and the role they play for customer experiences could provide a more holistic view on customer experiences. Further, studying different groups of customers and what a specific restaurant experience means for them would be interesting.
References


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