

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT TOUCHPOINTS IN HOTEL INDUSTRY

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Purpose: The purpose of the article is to identify the touchpoints and moments of interaction between hoteliers and their clients at various stages of consumption (pre-consumption, during, and post-consumption). This aims to highlight potential opportunities for firms to enable and stimulate actions within the framework of customer engagement in hotel industry.

Design/methodology/approach: The main method used for the research is a systematic literature review (SLR).

Findings: The results of the literature review revealed touchpoints in the hotel industry in both the real and virtual worlds. It was shown that interactions can be managed by various stakeholders. The necessity of appropriately managing touchpoints to generate desired outcomes was also highlighted.

Research limitations/implications: The literature review was conducted in only one database, SCOPUS. Four criteria were applied for the keywords. A small number of results were obtained. Research on CE touchpoints in the hotel industry may be expanded to include additional databases, using a greater variety of keyword combinations and incorporating synonyms of those used in this article. Furthermore, studies should continue in the business environment by conducting case studies to get the examples from the practice.

Practical implications: The practical implications of the study involve providing a framework that allows managers of hotels to establish customer engagement-focused companies and foster relationships with their customers that go beyond mere financial transactions.

Originality/value: The article identifies areas that can be utilized in the hotel services industry to generate new activities within the framework of customer engagement. So far, the literature has identified the antecedents of the phenomenon, its forms, consequences, and measurement scales.

Keywords: customer engagement, customer engagement behaviors, customer engagement touchpoints, hotel industry, hospitality.

Category of the paper: A literature review supported by the results of observations of business practices.

1. Introduction

The marketing concept of Customer Engagement (CE) which indicates customer activism in value creation, is currently the subject of interest for many researchers. Customer Engagement considered from a behavioral perspective (Customer Engagement Behavior – CEB) may be defined as behaviors directed at a brand or firm that extend beyond the act of purchasing, driven by motivational factors (van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010; Verleye et al., 2014; Jaakkola, Alexander, 2014). CE activities may be initiated by customers or by the company, may be undertaken by current or potential customers, they can occur in the customer-company relationship as well as in the customer-customer relationship, in real or in virtual world. Among others CE activities may include: word-of-mouth communication, recommendations, providing feedback, helping other customers, and contributing ideas for new products/services (Bijmolt et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010). Interactions with a company or with other customers are the value contribution to the firms by voluntary investment of customers' resources (Harmeling et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2019). However, the effects of CE for firms may be positive (e.g. higher sales, shareholders value, customer equity) (Writz et al., 2013; So et al., 2016; Beckers et al., 2016) and negative (e.g. additional costs, lack of control of business process, information overload) (Żyminkowska et al., 2019), that is why CE needs to be managed in order to maximise the positive outcomes and minimise the risks and disadvantages (Żyminkowska; Żyminkowski, 2018).

Customer Engagement phenomenon fits into the philosophy of relationship marketing. The creation of a bond with the customer marks the beginning of a resource exchange process (Strobacka, Lehtinen, 2001). The resources offered by customers during CE activities may include: e.g. knowledge about the product/brand/mark/other customers, customers' networks, persuasive capital or creativity/ideas (Harmeling et al., 2017). These may be significant resources that can determine the company's competitive advantage and what is important they originate from outside the organization (Wójcik-Karpacz, 2021). Proper customer relationship management and utilizing the resources offered can determine the success of the company. Building and developing relationships with customers beyond transactions is treated as a strategic necessity in marketing (Venkatesan, 2017).

Applying the principles of relationship marketing has become an indispensable element of conducting business in tourism industry especially in hospitality (hotel services). Hotel services require a high degree of interaction with the customer to tailor the service as closely as possible to their expectations. Thanks to the development of information technology, continuous customer contact leading to service personalization is now almost standard. Implementing the principles of the customer engagement concept in the hotel services industry and enabling guests to co-create services for themselves seems to be a necessity to remain competitive in the market.

CE appears to be increasingly well-defined and understood. The literature provides information on the antecedents (Kumar, Pansari, 2017), possible forms (Żyminkowska, Lorenc, 2017), effects (positive and negative) (Hollebeek et al., 2016), and measurement scales (Żyminkowska et al., 2023) of the phenomenon. Practical implications are also emerging, which, when appropriately applied, can lead to tangible and intangible benefits for companies. The concept is gaining increasing interest in business hotel practices but still there is an insufficient application the theory to the practice. The theory of customer engagement concept is still being researched and developed in the hospitality sector and it's just in an early stage. The purpose of this article is to find the touchpoints (occasions when hoteliers can be in contact with their customers) to realize and stimulate the customer engagement behaviors, to catch the moments when customers want to invest their resources, to give them the space and possibilities to co-create the services and finally to manage CEB to achieve the success. The phenomenon is interpreted from a managerial perspective.

2. Literature review

Touchpoint in accordance to Cambridge Dictionary can be defined in the context of communication as well as in the context of influence. Considering the first meaning, it is an occasion when a business or organization is in contact with its customers or when the business or organization meets its customers. It can be also the method of communicating. Touchpoint in the meaning of influence indicates impact on the developing of something (dictionary.cambridge.org, 2024). Customer engagement touchpoint may therefore be explained as an interaction point (interaction = a situation where two or more people or things communicate with each other or react to each other), point of contact or meeting, beyond purchase in which customers with firms or with other customers may develop value.

To achieve the research objective the systematic literature review was conducted. In spite of the expanding body of research on customer engagement generally, the knowledge about CE in tourism and hospitality sector remains scattered (Carvalho, Alves, 2022; Doran et al., 2022). The identification or creation of CE touchpoints has also been indicated in the literature as essential for companies to facilitate CEB (Żyminkowska et al., 2023). The systematic literature review approach was conducted to unify the research and offer thorough overview of the current knowledge (Moher et al., 2009; Page, 2021) on the topic of CE touchpoints in hotel industry. According to what the author was able to find, there are no studies referring and reporting on the possible moments of interaction beyond transaction, between hotel services providers and customers, based on the concept of customer engagement, considered from a managerial perspective. That is why, the paper was intended to identify, assess, and systematize the knowledge in this field (Petticrew, Roberts, 2006).

3. Research methodology

The purpose of this article was to identify the touchpoints and moments of interaction between hoteliers and their clients at various stages of consumption (pre-consumption, during, and post-consumption). This aimed to highlight potential opportunities for firms to enable and stimulate actions within the framework of customer engagement in hotel industry. To achieve the goal, the literature review was conducted. The articles were sourced from the SCOPUS database due to the fact that it is treated as the most comprehensive of peer-reviewed business, management, economics and cognate literature (Kranzbuhler et al., 2018). First, the keywords were established as: hotel OR hospitality OR tourism AND touchpoint. The search was made within the Title, Abstract and Keywords. The database, according to the specified criteria, retrieved 18 documents. Second, the selection was limited to subject area of Business, Management and Accounting what gave 14 results, Third, the Journals were selected and 12 documents were provided. All of them were in English, and this language was preferred. Fourth, the analysis included articles for which the full text was available (6). The final criterion was the thematic alignment of the article with the topic being discussed. Consequently, 2 articles were analyzed, and both of them are dated on 2024.

4. Results

With reference to two selected articles from the SCOPUS database, 31 touchpoints in total were found in hotel industry. In one article 17 touchpoints were indicated (Piriyakul et al., 2024), while in the second one 14 touchpoints were demonstrated (Simoni et al., 2024). One of the results was repeated – the touchpoint in the form of a website. In connection with the above, the total number of results was 30. The touchpoints in the hotel industry identified in the literature are shown in the table below:

Table 1.
Hotel touchpoints – literature review

Year of publication	Touchpoints in hotel industry – literature review	
	Touchpoints	Authors
2024	Website interactions Booking with hotel representatives Return Recommendation Review Hotel location Front end service Hotel restaurant Outside restaurant Breakfast point	Intaka Piriyakul, Shawannluck Kunathikornkit, Rapepun Piriyakul

	Room Spa – massage Swimming pool Club lounge Beach Hotel neighborhood Airport	
2021	Virtual reality External review platforms Forum Blog Word-of-mouth Advertising Website In-store interactions Chatbot Tv/telephone marketing Paper Catalogue Application Virtual assistant Virtual catalogue	Michele Simoni, Annarita Sorrentino, Daniele Leone, Andrea Caporuscio

Source: own research.

5. Discussion

Tourist products are very complicated for marketers, to provide information for. They are heterogeneous and not objectively determined as mostly customers determine the value subjectively (Prebensen, Foss, 2011; Sugathan, Ranjan, 2019). Customer engagement process may start at the moment when the customer becomes aware of certain company, this should be the point of further interactions and contact. Customer engagement activities may be taken pre-consumption, during and post-consumption. With this in mind, hotel managers can propose interactions tailored to each stage of consumption, directly aligned with the outcomes expected at that specific stage.

For the sake of clarity, in Table 2, the author proposes categorization of identified touchpoints in accordance to the stage of consumption at which they may occur. It is based on the author's insights and observations. This is the new establishment in the research on CE in hotel industry. In the pre-consumption stage, the following touchpoints were included: website interactions, booking (making a reservation), review platforms, forum, blogs, word-of-mouth, advertising, chatbots, tv/telephone marketing, paper/virtual catalogues, applications, virtual assistants. Virtual reality (VR) was given in the literature as an example of how customers can be engaged in pre-consumption stage (Simoni et al., 2021), when they are attracted of full immersion in a digital experience (Wei, 2019; Pizzi et al., 2019). The author of this article indicates that VR may be used as well during the consumption to engage customers through all stay at the hotel. In author's opinion, during the consumption there are the most possibilities to engage customers in accordance to identified touchpoints. All "in-store" interactions in

different areas such as restaurant, swimming pool, room, breakfast point, spa, etc. are the opportunities to create value with or by customers at the place and at the time of consumption. Post-consumption touchpoints which have been indicated in the literature mostly repeat what can happen in the two earlier stages of consumption; however, one new element appears - return.

Table 2.
Hotel touchpoints – systematization

Touchpoints in hotel industry – systematization		
Pre-consumption	During-consumption	Post-consumption
Website interactions	Website interactions	Website interactions
Booking with hotel representatives	Recommendation	Return
Airport	Review	Recommendation
Outside restaurant	Hotel location	Review
Beach	Front end service	Airport
Hotel neighborhood	Hotel restaurant	Outside restaurant
Virtual reality	Outside restaurant	Beach
External review platforms	Breakfast point	Hotel neighborhood
Forum	Room	External review platforms
Blog	Spa – massage	Forum
Word-of-mouth	Swimming pool	Blog
Advertising	Club lounge	Word-of-mouth
Chatbot	Beach	Advertising
Tv/telephone marketing	Hotel neighborhood	Chatbot
Paper Catalogue	Virtual reality	Tv/telephone marketing
Application	External review platforms	Paper Catalogue
Virtual assistant	Forum	Application
Virtual catalogue	Blog	Virtual assistant
	Word-of-mouth	Virtual catalogue
	Advertising	
	In-store interactions	
	Paper Catalogue	
	Application	
	Virtual assistant	
	Virtual catalogue	

Source: own research.

Touchpoints are the elements of customer journey. Customer journey across the consumption stages (pre-consumption, during-consumption, post-consumption) is considered as a source of customer value (Lemon, Verhoef, 2016; Kuehnl et al., 2019). All hospitality interactions with customers (guests), inside or outside the hotel may be treated as touchpoints, every touchpoint consists of hotel service and a customer's action. Hotel touchpoints may be internal (hotel services) or external (external restaurants, neighborhood, airports) (Piriyakul et al., 2024). Touchpoints occur across various channels, both online and offline, and they can be managed by firms, partners, customers, or third parties (Lemon, Verhoef, 2016). Hoteliers, being aware of the possible interaction moments as well as of the consumption stages in which they may take place, to maximize the value, may design, develop, organize proper activities to stimulate Customer Engagement. They may delegate trained employees to perform and monitor the CE activities within each touchpoint, at the appropriate stage of consumption to generate

the desired effects. Identifying CE touchpoints should be the part of broader CE strategy and CE management in the company.

It is noteworthy that the touchpoints identified in the literature are both specific actions and places or spaces that can be utilized to generate activities. At this stage of research in the tourism services industry, the literature does not provide specific solutions but rather indicates directions that offer opportunities for further development and exploration. The next planned author's research is to conduct case study in hotels to verify if there are any other possible touchpoints, to create the most comprehensive catalog of possible interaction points in hotel industry, in the context of Customer Engagement.

6. Conclusions

Nowadays, when customers actively participate in hotel offerings, and when it brings the positive outcomes to the companies, it is essential for business practitioners to pinpoint the key touchpoints where customers can be engaged (Simoni et al., 2021). CE needs to be managed in a strategic manner, CEB should be simulate to build and deepen customer relationships (Kumar et al., 2010; Venkatesan, 2017; Beckers et al., 2018) and the touchpoints should be planned and organized with a specific goals (Simoni, 2021). It is important to identify all possible spaces to generate the interaction with customers to create value. To develop customer engagement behavior (CEB) in the hotel services industry, it is essential to identify areas that provide opportunities for interaction and which can be used to stimulate CEB, ensuring that none are overlooked and every opportunity for interaction is effectively utilized to create new value. The paper is addressed to academic community as a contribution to the development of knowledge on customer engagement (CE) and customer engagement behavior (CEB) in the hospitality industry, as well as to hoteliers to enhance business efficiency.

The new knowledge coming from the article is firstly anchored in the division of touchpoints in the hotel industry into the various stages of consumption, and secondly, it is embedded in the principles of the customer engagement concept in hospitality. This may be a good advice for marketers and hoteliers to consciously engage customers and thereby strive to achieve a competitive advantage. The results of the research may also be used by the academicians to develop the knowledge about CE, especially in tourism. The limitation of the research is that only a few literature studies were found in the area of hotel touchpoints, what on the other hand may indicate that the topic is just at the beginning of researchers interest focused on the hotel industry. Customer Engagement Concept in hospitality is still in the research phase. Practitioners may be just getting acquainted with the assumptions of the concept, implementing just the increasingly known elements. Therefore, further research on CE phenomenon in the hotel industry is necessary. The next stage of research on customer

engagement behavior (CEB) in the hospitality industry could involve developing a CE journey map. This would aim to outline the path a customer might take to engage, in order to further stimulate these behaviors in line with the planned achievable outcomes.

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