The Interplay of Customer Experience and Commitment

Customer experience management is being hailed as the next field upon which firms will compete to grow market share. Research by Gartner finds that by 2017, 89% of companies plan to compete primarily on the basis of customer experience (Gartner, 2016). Moreover, a new industry of customer experience management professionals has recently emerged to address the rapidly growing demand by businesses for expertise in the field (Fatma, 2014).

Despite this emphasis, consensus among managers or academics regarding what comprises customer experience, how it is measured and how it differs from similar constructs (e.g., customer engagement, customer value, etc.) is building, but has yet to emerge. Consequently, there exists no general consensus regarding the aspects of customer experience that require assessment and metrics and the relationship between customer experience and other more established marketing constructs. The purpose of this conceptual article is to better understand customer experience by exploring its relationship with customer commitment.

This article builds upon the work of De Keyser *et al.* (2015), who suggest: "Customer experience is comprised of the cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial, and social elements that mark the customer's direct or indirect interaction with a [set of] market actor[s]" (p. 1). Specifically, we focus on customer assessment of cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial, and social experience as it relates to customer commitment. Moreover, since the overriding goal of companies' efforts to enhance customer experience is to engender commitment to the brand, we suspect that gauging customer commitment represents a logical, desirable complement to customer experience measurement. In particular, as commitment is the attitudinal component of

consumer loyalty that is developed after an experience (or experiences) with a brand (Lariviere *et al.*, 2014), we would expect that the initial direction of causality to be from the customer experience to customer commitment. But once customers have become committed to a firm or brand, we would expect this commitment to color perceptions of their customer experiences (a form of confirmation bias). Therefore, we examine the question, how do customer commitment and customer experience interact.

To explore this question, we engage the five-component model of commitment (e.g. consumer commitment is comprised of affective, normative, forced, habitual and economic dimensions, see Keiningham *et al.,* 2015 for review), as a framework for examining the conceptual relationship between customer experience and commitment (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 HERE

Whereas extant literature presumes a straightforward progression from cumulative customer experience to customer commitment (see Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), we argue in this paper that customer commitment will not only be affected by customer experience but also vice versa (for repeated customer-provider interactions). Specifically, a customer's commitment to a brand biases his/her perceptions of the experience through dynamics such as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), self-perception (Bem, 1967), and biased scanning (Janis and King, 1954). Therefore, we believe that attempts to gauge objectively customer experience will be impacted not only by customers' perceptions of the actual experience, but also by the inherent biases which arise from the level and type of commitment customers' hold to a brand. For that reason, we believe it is imperative for researchers and firms to better understand the relationship

between customer commitment and customer experience and its implications for service theory and practice.

We contribute to literature in several ways. First, we contribute to the emerging stream of literature on customer experience by synthesizing this literature and proposing a conceptualization for customer experience. Second, we propose how to disentangle the relationship between two multidimensional constructs: customer experience De Keyser *et al.* (2015) and customer commitment (Keiningham *et al.,* 2015). Third, we offer numerous avenues for further empirical research.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, as the aforementioned model of customer experience is composed of five elements, we begin by examining how each of these elements impact customer experience. We then explore how the five components of commitment (Keiningham *et al.*, 2015) would be expected to influence perceptions of customer experience and vice versa. We conclude with a discussion of the implications and a future research agenda.

ELEMENTS OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Understanding and improving customer experience has become a management mantra. While the attractiveness of this goal for improving firm performance and customer wellbeing is self-evident, the elements that comprise customer experience and how these elements relate to customer assessment of their experience before during and after their encounter with a brand requires further and more detailed examination. The following sections describe in greater detail the five elements of customer experience described by De Keyser *et al*. (2015) and how they have been conceptualized and measured in other contexts.

Cognitive Elements of Customer Experience

Cognitive processes are "higher mental processes, such as perception, memory, language, problem solving, and abstract thinking" (APA, 2016). They have been studied in relation to customer experience utilizing two different perspectives: attainment of goals and (dis)confirmation of prior expectations.

The first perspective is rooted in the assumption that consumers are goal-directed in their behaviour. For example, customers buy vitamins for health; they do grocery shopping in order to enjoy food. Customers set up goals either consciously or unconsciously in specific contexts and use consumption as an instrument to attain them (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 1999). The marketing literature describes goal-directed behaviour as a cognitive process; attainment of goals is the consequence this process (e.g., Baumgartner and Pieters, 2008). Thus, attainment of goals constitutes one part of customer experience and reflecting on goal attainment is crucial to evaluate the cognitive element of customer experience (Novak *et al.*, 2003).

The second perspective is grounded on the assumption that customers have expectations prior to choosing a service. Whether the actual customer experiences (dis)confirm those prior expectations has been covered by research investigating (dis)satisfaction, which is a result of this (dis)confirmation (e.g., Gentil *et al.*, 2007; Homburg *et al.*, 2006). Whereas early literature operationalized the evaluation of (dis)confirmation and thus (dis)satisfaction as mainly cognitively driven (e.g., Oliver, 1980; Bitner, 1990), later research has shown that both cognitive and affective processes influence this evaluation (e.g., Wirtz and Bateson, 1999).

Measuring the cognitive elements of Customer Experience

Both of the aforementioned streams of literature have developed instruments to assess goal achievement and expectation (dis)confirmation. In a perspective of goal attainment, some studies measure benefits by examining goal achievement (e.g., Babin *et al.*, 1994), by evaluating the consequence of consumption (e.g., Voss *et al.*, 2003), or by capturing post-consumption

emotions (e.g. Chitturi *et al.*, 2008). The first comprise such items as the extent to which customers accomplish goals while the latter two use adjectives (e.g., effective, helpful, stimulated, excited).

With regard to (dis)confirmation of expectations, the literature offers various approaches that mainly differ in their 1) specificity towards a particular product and/or service, 2) separation of measurement of expectations and experiences/performance and 3) number of items. First, some measures of customer experience are context specific and measure the cognitive component of the experience with for example, the functionality, speed, or availability of accessories for a particular product and/or service (Gentil *et al.*, 2007); other measures try to capture the cognitive component of the experience on an abstract level that is usable by including any type of product and/or service, e.g. "My experience with using ___ was better than I expected" (Bhattacherjee, 2001, or similar Homburg *et al.*, 2006; Wirtz and Bateson, 1999). Second, most research measures the fulfillment of expectations directly (e.g., Bhattacherjee, 2001) even though literature has partly criticized direct measurement and suggested separating measuring expectations and experience (e.g., Brown *et al.*, 2008). Third, most authors have utilized multiple items to measure the (dis)confirmation (Bhattacherjee, 2001; Gentil *et al.*, 2007) while others have only utilized one item to capture it (Homburg *et al.*, 2006).

Emotional Elements of Customer Experience

Building upon earlier work that conceptualized consumer decision making as largely rational in nature, marketing and consumer behaviour scholars in the late 20th century highlighted the influence of emotions on consumer attitudes and responses to marketing activities (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Early studies of consumer emotions built upon work in the psychology literature, where researchers acknowledged the complex nature of emotions

and sought to address inherent difficulties in identifying, measuring and distinguishing between emotional states (e.g., Izard, 1977; Plutchik, 1980).

Several key challenges to measuring the emotional elements of consumer behaviour arose out of this early research, including ambiguities regarding the structure and content of emotions and their relevance to consumer behaviour (see Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999; Laros and Steenkamp, 2005). These studies approached consumer emotions in a variety of ways. Some conceptualized them in terms of positive and negative affect (see Oliver, 1997/2010). Others synthesized emotion research into comprehensive consumption-related emotion sets (see Richins, 1997; Ruth *et al.*, 2002) or concentrated on individual emotions such as joy and surprise (Arnold *et al.*, 2005; Finn, 2005), delight (Oliver *et al.*, 1997), anger, rage, irritation, frustration, annoyance (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2003) and regret (see Tsiros and Mittal, 2000) and their relationship to consumer outcomes like delight, satisfaction, disgust and outrage (see Parasuraman *et al.*, 2016; Bougie, Pieters and Zeelenberg, 2003).

Measuring the emotional elements of Customer Experience

As one might expect, this variety of approaches regarding the content and structure of emotions leads to inconsistencies in efforts to measure the influence of emotions on customer experience. This is particularly relevant in service contexts, since customer encounters with products, brands and employees can lead to intense emotions (see Matilla and Enz, 2002) which influence key customer outcomes like word of mouth (Schoefer and Diamantopoulos, 2008) and other metrics such as loyalty, retention and share of wallet (Keiningham *et al.*, 2007).

Richins (1997) conducted six empirical studies designed to develop an appropriate way to measure customer related emotions. In the first study, Richins collected a large list of consumer emotions in their own vocabulary, identifying 175 distinct emotion descriptors. Studies two through four narrowed the list to a Consumption Emotion Set (CES) which were tested against

key emotion measures (e.g. Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Izard, 1977; Havlena and Holbrook, 1986; Edell and Burke, 1987; Batra and Holbrook, 1990).

The CES "represents the range of emotions consumers most frequently experience in consumption situations" (Richins, 1997, p. 142) that capture a greater diversity of emotions than measures designed without the consumption context in mind. It is important to note, however, that the Richens does not deem CES to be a definitive assessment tool, rather a catalyst for examining and measuring customer emotions. For that reason, we view the CES as a potential stepping off point for understanding the emotional elements of customer experience, recognizing that emotions are contextual in nature and that other scales (e.g., Brakus *et al.*, 2009) provide useful possible frames.

Physical and Sensorial Elements of Customer Experience

The physical environment, or 'servicescape' (Bitner, 1992), refers to the manmade, firm-controllable surroundings within which service experience occurs. Offline servicescapes comprise elements such as artifacts, music, lighting, layout and signage (Lam, 2001). Online servicescape considerations focus on website features, such as consumer-friendly shopping interfaces (Griffith, 2005) and design cues such as uncluttered screens and fast presentations (Rose *et al.*, 2012). Customers' interactions with servicescapes have been shown to influence their experiences. For example, within offline settings, impacts are observed on satisfaction, facility image perceptions, word of mouth behaviours and intentions to purchase (e.g. Reimer and Kuehn, 2005; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996; Baker *et al.*, 1994). In online environments, emotional and cognitive responses, such as satisfaction (Eroglu *et al.*, 2003), purchase intentions (Harris and Goode, 2010) and loyalty (Koering, 2003) are observed. Given its broad acceptance in existing literature, we adopt Bitner's (1992) categorization of servicescape elements as ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and signs, symbols and artifacts.

1. Ambient conditions:

Ambient conditions comprise background environmental stimuli (Grayson and McNeil, 2009), including visual (e.g., lighting, colors and shapes (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2008)), aesthetic cleanliness, olfactory (e.g., scent and air quality (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001)), temperature (Reimer and Kuehn, 2005), and auditory (e.g., music and noise (Garlin and Owen, 2006; Oakes and North, 2008)) elements. The perception and impact of these stimuli are dependent on the five senses: sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing, and thus form the sensorial aspect of customer experience.

2. Spatial layout and functionality:

Spatial layout refers to the manner in which items such as equipment and furniture are arranged, their size and shape, and the space between them (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2010). It also refers to the lesser observable elements such as comfort and accessibility (Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996). Key to customer appraisals of spatial layout is functionality; that is, the facilitation by the layout of customer goal achievement (Ng, 2003). In offline and online scenarios, spatial layout and functionality considerations relate to design (Hultén, 2012). In this regard, a number of studies investigated the impact of the retail store layout, in-store and point-of-purchase displays, crowding and the use of orientation aids, with outcomes linked to customer perceptions, and behavioural responses such as propensity to purchase (Hultén, 2012), unplanned purchase behaviour (Inman *et al.*, 2009), and increased sales and willingness to spend (Fiore *et al.*, 2000). In an online environment, Rose *et al.* (2012) highlighted the relationship between ease of use (site navigation, search and functionality) and cognitive perceptions of control. The self-service technology research stream (Curran and Meuter, 2005) further emphasizes the importance of functionality within servicescapes where customers need to perform the service.

3. Signs, symbols and artifacts:

In addition to their visual sensory impact, signs, symbols and artifacts are used as communication tools to stimulate more abstract customer meaning-making (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). Signs may confirm directions, convey rules of behaviour, and communicate a firm's image (Bitner, 1992). Similarly, companies use signs to adorn a servicescape with corporate brands, logos, and monikers, creating "brandscapes" (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Design considerations incorporate both internal and external areas, such as storefront, entrances, display windows, and building architecture (Cornelius *et al.*, 2010). Symbols and artifacts such as construction material, artwork and decorative items are used to communicate less explicitly than signs. Research in this field has focused mainly on the effect on sales and quality perceptions (Patton, 1981), on value perceptions of retail outlets (Mathwick *et al.*, 2002), customers' sense of control (Wener and Kaminoff, 1982), and mood arousal and attention grabbing (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992).

Measuring the physical and sensorial elements of Customer Experience

Within the marketing management domain, the physical and sensorial elements of customer experience are typically measured using experimental methods: senses are manipulated in field or lab-based experiments and customer emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses are measured. While this approach to investigating physical and sensory interactions generates valuable insight, the sensory experience itself is overlooked; that is, *what* the customer is sensing when interacting with the physical environment and to *what extent* is not captured.

Methods derived from alternative fields offer possible solutions to this limitation. For instance, sounds heard by customers may be measured using a noise dose meter and the 'Decibel A' scale (Liu and Tan, 2000; Hodge and Thompson, 1990). Taste may be measured using the time intensity (TI) technique, whereby participants score the intensity of a specific flavor over a given time period (Le Révérend *et al.*, 2008; Piggott, 2000), or by the temporal dominance of

sensation (TDS) technique, which captures the most dominant flavor (or indeed, sense) over time (Pineau *et al.*, 2009). Alternatively, taste may be manipulated by the use of the glycoprotein miraculin, which disrupts participant taste receptors (e.g., Litt and Shiv, 2012). TDS and TI measures may also be applied to examinations of scent, as illustrated by Leclercq and Blancher (2012), who also incorporated proton transfer mass spectrometry (PTR-MS) to measure the volume of scent molecule within participants' noses. Similarly, recent developments in measuring the physical elements of customer experience could be employed. In this respect, the innovative physical dining environment design (IPDED) evaluation model is used, which consists of a survey measuring four main dimensions: creativity, aesthetics, eco-friendliness and performance (Horng *et al.*, 2013).

While these alternative approaches to physical and sensory measurement may in part address the limitations of experimental techniques, they are limited by their non-naturalistic nature. The advancement of technology, however, allows for a more naturalistic approach to the measurement of the physical elements effects. For instance, the growing use of neurophysiological methods enhances our understanding of consumer behaviour within servicescapes. The use of eye tracking technology, for instance, is established in studies of shelf space and layouts (Chandon *et al.*, 2009; Huneke *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, biometrics have grown in popularity, capturing physiological and behavioural responses to external stimuli (Potter and Bolls, 2012). Measurable physiological characteristics include fingerprints, hand geometry, facial characteristics, iris, retina, personal scent and DNA, while behavioural characteristics include handwriting, keystroke, voice and gait (Jones *et al.*, 2007). Among the most commonly studied physiological responses within servicescape is heart rate, breathing, and skin conductance (Sheng and Joginapelly, 2012). Finally, fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) is a noninvasive method that tracks changes in blood oxygenation during cognitive

processes (Ogawa *et al*., 1990). This method has been used to measure trust and distrust by capturing the location, timing, and level of brain activity that underlies trust and distrust in experimentally manipulated environments (Dimoka *et al*., 2010). Furthermore, techniques of spatial analysis involving diagrammatic plans have been used to identify the impact of layout upon customers' paths and behaviours within a particular physical environment (Peponis *et al*., 2004).

The Social Elements of Customer Experience

The social aspect of customer experience refers to the influence of staff, other customers, and wider social network(s) on a customer's experience with a brand (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). The interactions with and appearance of the service personnel, other customers, as well as customer's reference groups may affect his or her experience with a brand (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009).

Social identities are "mental representations that can become a basic part of how consumers view themselves" (Reed, 2004, p. 286). These include political and religious affiliation, as well as other lifestyle markers such as occupation, familial roles (e.g., parent/child/sibling), or visible interests and activities (e.g., athlete, musician, artist, etc.). Individuals will typically have several social identities. Identity salience refers to a temporary state during which one (or more) of a consumer's social identities comes to the fore (Forehand *et al.*, 2002). Congruence between salient social identities and other social influences and elements such as product and/or service offerings and advertising are therefore expected to positively influence consumer choice.

Measuring the social elements of Customer Experience

The variety and multitude of individual, group and networked influences on customer experience poses a challenge in terms of developing consistent and uniform measurement tools to capture the social element of customer experience. However, it is critical to capture the social

experience as one of the key determinants of customer experience (De Keyser *et al.*, 2015). Given the highly contextual, cultural and fluid nature of social encounters in the marketplace, a simplistic or singular approach to measurement would not be sufficient to account for the complexity of social interactions surrounding customer's engagement with a brand.

These socio-cultural elements of customer experience inspired the interpretive research tradition and its varied approaches (e.g., ethnography, netnography, depth interviews, case studies, semiotics, metaphor analysis, etc.) to uncover the unique social aspects of customer behaviour in multiple and varied contexts (see Arnould and Thompson, 2005; 2008 for review). This stream of research underscores the importance and fluidity of the social aspect of consumer behaviour.

Overall, the preceding sections examine customer experience as a multi-dimensional construct (Gentil *et al.*, 2007) and highlight the complexity of practicing customer experience management and measuring customer experience within and across these multiple domains. In the following section we propose a framework for examining customer experience, using customer satisfaction measurement as a proxy for the assessment of customer experience and customer commitment as a proxy for customer loyalty.

COMMITMENT AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Managers' interest in the customer experience results from a general belief that enhancing customer experience will result in greater loyalty to the firm or brand. As loyalty represents "a deeply held commitment" that results in repeat purchasing behaviour (Oliver, 1999, p. 34), *commitment* is the customer attitude that managers are seeking to influence in the hope of engendering increased purchase behaviours. Once achieved, however, customer commitment has the potential to influence customers' perceptions of subsequent experiences.

We acknowledge that, to date, there is no research on the influence of commitment on perceptions of customer experience. There is, however, a body of evidence regarding the relationship between customer satisfaction and commitment. While satisfaction represents the level of *fulfillment* achieved through customers' experiences with a brand (as opposed to the more granular elements that *comprise* customer experience), we argue that satisfaction is an appropriate surrogate for assessing the potential of different commitment dimensions to influence perceptions of customer experience. The following section provides further evidence for this relationship.

Customer Satisfaction and Commitment: An Overview

Research regarding the order of influence between satisfaction and commitment is not resolved. In the literature, there are four competing models: 1) satisfaction influences commitment, i.e., satisfaction → commitment (e.g. Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002), 2) commitment influences satisfaction, i.e., commitment → satisfaction (e.g., Bateman and Strasser 1984), 3) satisfaction and commitment have a reciprocal relationship, i.e., satisfaction ↔ commitment (e.g. Farkas and Tetrick 1989), and 4) no causal relationship exists between satisfaction and commitment, i.e. satisfaction ⇎ commitment (e.g. Anderson and Williams 1992).

Most of the research investigating the causal order of satisfaction and commitment comes from the organizational behaviour literature. The majority of researchers in this area presume that job satisfaction is an antecedent to organizational commitment (e.g., Steers, 1977; Williams and Hazer, 1986). The underlying reasoning behind the generally accepted view is articulated by Porter *et al.* (1974, p. 608):

> *"a relatively greater amount of time would be required for an employee to determine his*
> *level of commitment to the organization than would be the case with his level of job*

satisfaction. This process is likely to result in a stable and enduring level of commitment.

On the other hand, the degree of one's job satisfaction ... may represent a more rapidly

formed affective response than does commitment."

Therefore, the rapid formation of satisfaction when compared to the longer-term development of

commitment suggests that it is satisfaction that leads to commitment (Williams and Hazer,

1986). Despite the seeming logic of this argument, however, researchers find conflicting

evidence.

Bateman and Strasser (1984), Dosset and Suszko (1990), and Vandenberg and Lance

(1992) find that organizational commitment is an antecedent to job satisfaction. The underlying

theoretical arguments as to why this would be the case draw largely from cognitive dissonance

theory (Festinger, 1957). Specifically, cognitive dissonance theory proposes that when an

individual's voluntarily performed behaviour contradicts a previously formed attitude it causes

dissonance, and as a result the individual rationalizes his/her counter-attitudinal behaviour.

Specifically, Bateman and Strasser (1984, p. 97) argue, "commitment initiates a rationalizing

process through which individuals 'make sense' of their current situation by developing attitudes

(satisfaction) that are consistent with their commitment."

Because models 1 and 2 (e.g., satisfaction → commitment and commitment →

satisfaction) can be supported by theory, and empirical evidence can be found for both models,

some researchers have suggested that the relationship between the two constructs may be

reciprocal (e.g., satisfaction ↔ commitment). Farkas and Tetrick (1989) specifically advocate

this model based upon the results of their investigation, suggesting that "commitment and

satisfaction may be either cyclically or reciprocally related (p. 855)."

Finally, Curry *et al.* (1986) and Anderson and Williams (1992) find no temporal

relationship between the two constructs. The underlying hypothesis for why this might be the

case is that job satisfaction (JS) and organizational commitment (OC) are thought to be correlated due to "common causal variables…thus observed JS-OC correlations may reflect the fact that JS and OC share common antecedents, but are not causally related" (Vandenberg and Lance, 1992, p. 155).

In the marketing literature, most researchers similarly presume that satisfaction is an antecedent to commitment (e.g., Bansal *et al.*, 2004; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002). As Brown and colleagues (2005, p. 133) note, "it is difficult to imagine a consumer developing a committed relationship … without having experienced satisfaction from exchanges with [a firm]."

As is the case in the organizational behaviour literature, however, there is conflicting evidence regarding the direction of influence of satisfaction and commitment. For example, Verhoef (2003) finds that affective commitment, not satisfaction, predicts retention when both variables are included in the model. This would seem to imply that commitment is closer to customer behaviour than is satisfaction in the commonly presumed chain of effects (e.g., satisfaction → commitment → retention). Gustafsson *et al.* (2005), however, find the opposite result; that affective commitment does not predict customer retention when it is included with customer satisfaction in their models, which implies the reverse order for satisfaction and commitment (e.g., commitment → satisfaction → retention). Additionally, using a competing models approach designed specifically to investigate the directionality between customer satisfaction and affective commitment, Johnson *et al.* (2008) find that commitment influences satisfaction.

As with research into organizational commitment and job satisfaction, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), offers a plausible explanation as to why commitment would

be an antecedent to satisfaction. Self-perception theory (Bem, 1967, 1972), and biased scanning (Janis and King, 1954), also offer plausible explanations.

Self-perception theory proposes that when people are asked to report an attitude, they simply infer this attitude from implications of past behaviour (e.g., if I did it, it must have been desirable) (Albarracín and Wyer, 2000; Bem, 1967, 1972). Biased scanning proposes that "after people have engaged in a particular behaviour they often conduct a biased search of memory for previously acquired knowledge that confirms the legitimacy of their act … They may then … form a new attitude toward the behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), and this attitude, in turn, might influence both their intentions to repeat the behaviour and their actual decision to do so when the occasion arises" (Albarracín and Wyer, 2000, p. 6). It appears logical that in addition to attitude formation, each of these theories would extend to customers' perceptions of satisfaction.

To date, marketing scholars have not confirmed that satisfaction and commitment are reciprocal. Similarly, there is nothing in the marketing literature to suggest that satisfaction and commitment are not causally related to one another.

As noted earlier, both satisfaction → commitment, and commitment → satisfaction are theoretically supportable. Oliver's (1999, 2010) research into the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty may offer additional insight into when we might be more likely to expect one direction of influence over the other. Specifically, Oliver observes that repeated high levels of satisfaction are necessary to engender consumer loyalty, but at some point it is possible for loyalty to become independent of satisfaction. Therefore, if customers have become loyal to a firm or brand whereby they continue to repurchase "despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour" (Oliver, 1999, p. 34), cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and self-perception theory (Bem, 1967, 1972) suggest that

customers' behavioural loyalty would be expected to influence their perceptions of the satisfactoriness of encounters with the firm/brand.

Furthermore, as Oliver (2010) argues, loyalty attitudes and behaviours result from repeated encounters, thus it may be that the commitment-satisfaction relationship is stronger for some product/service categories than for others (e.g., repeat usage products/service categories may be more prone to the commitment → satisfaction order of influence than single usage or low repetition product/service categories).

While we acknowledge that these perspectives may raise more questions than answers regarding the relationship between the customer perception of experience (in this case, the consumer's level of fulfillment regarding the consumption experience, i.e. satisfaction) and commitment, we contend that the five-component model of customer commitment (Keiningham *et al.*, 2015) provides a useful framework for exploring these concepts. The following section describes the relationships between satisfaction and affective, normative, forced, habitual and economic commitment.

Affective Commitment, Normative Commitment and Customer Satisfaction

It is important to note that satisfaction → commitment relationship is typically presumed for affective commitment only. Research measuring commitment as a unidimensional construct, which represents the overwhelming majority of commitment-related research in marketing, typically conceptualizes the commitment construct as a positive affect-based commitment (see Keiningham *et al.*, 2015). Very little research has been conducted regarding the direction of influence between satisfaction and other forms of commitment (the notable exception being Cramer (1996), discussed later).

The theoretical arguments regarding why affective commitment would influence satisfaction (i.e., cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), self-perception theory (Bem,

1967), and biased scanning (Janis and King, 1954)), however, appear equally valid for why normative commitment (i.e. a bond based upon an obligation/duty) would be expected to influence satisfaction. Furthermore, research shows that moral obligation "has independent effects on behavioural intentions … [and] may affect attitudes themselves" (Sparks and Shepherd 2002, p. 299). Here too, it appears logical that this would extend to perceptions of satisfaction. In fact, we witness this frequently with regard to ideological commitments. For example, research finds that political party affiliation influences perceptions (Kaplan *et al.*, 2007). In some cases, this results in a suspicion of the motives of opposing party members regarding behaviours that are not deemed suspicious of in-party members. Clearly, such motivated suspicion towards out-group individuals and presumed acceptableness towards in-group individuals would influence satisfaction levels regarding the same behaviours performed by members of these two groups.

Continuance Commitment and Customer Satisfaction

Continuance commitment as conceptualized in the literature comprises three components: forced commitment, habitual commitment, and economic commitment. Unlike previous commitment models that reflect three components, Keiningham *et al.* (2015) find that these three components are distinct commitment constructs, and result in different consumer outcomes. With regard to the relationship between continuance commitment and satisfaction, to date no researcher has explicitly offered theoretical arguments as to why one construct would be expected to influence the other. Thus far it appears that only Cramer (1996) has sought to explicitly examine the direction of influence, specifically examining the relationship between job satisfaction and continuance commitment. Cramer found no temporal relationship between the constructs. Whether or not this reflects the actual or typical relationship between satisfaction and continuance commitment cannot be assessed by this study alone. It does, however, reflect a need

to examine more closely the relationship between the three components of continuance commitment (e.g.., forced, habitual, and economic) and satisfaction. Specifically, we propose that these commitment dimensions would be expected to influence satisfaction, not the other way around.

Forced Commitment and Customer Satisfaction

With regard to forced commitment, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where an individual's level of satisfaction would influence his/her general belief that he/she had few alternatives. It is, however, very easy to imagine scenarios where commitment based upon a lack of alternatives would influence satisfaction (and perceptions of customer experience). Research in psychology and marketing supports the need for self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985), and that a lack of freedom of choice leads to negative psychological outcomes (Averill, 1973; Deci and Ryan, 1985; Langer and Rodin, 1976; Wortman, 1975). In fact, in a clear indication of the influence of constraint-based commitment and satisfaction, the marketing literature frequently refers to customers who perceive no viable alternatives with variations on the word captive: e.g., "trapped" (Fournier *et al.*, 1998), "hostages" (Jones and Sasser, 1995) and "prisoners" (Curasi and Kennedy, 2002).

Habitual Commitment and Customer Satisfaction

With regard to habitual commitment, research indicates that it is not guided by consumer attitudes or intentions (Ji and Wood, 2007; Liu-Thompkins and Tam, 2010). Therefore, once behaviour has become a habit, satisfaction would not be expected to materially alter the behaviour. For example, Neal *et al.* (2009; Wood and Neal, 2009) showed that habitual popcorn eaters ate the same amount of popcorn at a movie theater regardless of whether or not the popcorn was fresh or stale. As would be expected, however, consumers of the stale popcorn reported being much less satisfied with the popcorn.

Researchers in psychology find that habitual behaviour causes individuals to infer attitudes from implications of their behaviour as per self-perception theory (Bem 1967). Specifically, Wood and Neal (2009, p. 584) argue, "Because people have limited introspective access to the implicit cognitive associations that guide their habits (e.g., Beilock and Carr, 2001; Foerde *et al.*, 2006), they are forced to infer the relevant internal states from external behaviours and the contexts in which the behaviours occur (Bem, 1972)." As a result, inferring from self-perception theory, habitual commitment would be expected to influence satisfaction perceptions.

Economic Commitment and Customer Satisfaction

With regard to economic commitment (e.g. customers cognitive appraisals of his or her investment in the brand/provider (Keiningham, *et al*., 2015)), here too we would expect the primary direction of influence to be from commitment to satisfaction. The underlying reason for this is intuitive; economic utility clearly influences satisfaction with an encounter and with the entire firm-customer relationship, not the other way around (Turley and Fugate, 1993).

Taken together, these findings have important implications regarding the direction of influence of satisfaction and commitment. Theory appears to support the idea that continuance commitment should influence satisfaction. Also, there appears to be strong theoretical support that the same direction of influence should hold for normative commitment.

With regard to affective commitment, theory and logic indicate that commitment would lead to satisfaction for new customers. But for repeat usage products/services by experienced customers, there appears to be strong theoretical support that the primary direction of influence is from commitment to satisfaction.

As satisfaction is reflection of customers' fulfillment resulting from their experiences, by logical extension there is strong theoretical support that customers' perceptions of their experiences will be influenced by their level and type of commitment to a firm or brand. This

implies that measuring customer experience without a clear understanding of the type and level of commitment held by the customer will be difficult for managers to interpret. For example, objectively similar experiences involving two different firms—one to whom the customer has a strong affective commitment, the other to which she feels a forced commitment—are likely to be perceived very differently by the customer.

This reflects the intrinsic difficulty in measuring and managing customer experience discussed earlier. Indeed, customer experience is "inherently personal and unique to the individual customer" (De Keyser *et al.*, 2015, p. 15).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Managers have demonstrated a propensity to gravitate to flawed but simple metrics when confronted with complexity (Little, 1970; 2004). Therefore, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where C-level managers (e.g., chief executive officers, chief marketing officers, chief operations officers, etc.) are regularly monitoring their firms' performance on all relevant elements of customer experience.

The ultimate goal of improving customer experience—to foster customer commitment to the brand—impacts how customers perceive their experiences. This has very important implications for managers. As each commitment dimension tends to correspond to a particular firm strategy, managers need to recognize that the type of commitment fostered will impact the lens through which customers view the experience. For example, many service firms seek to enhance economic commitment through the use of loyalty rewards programs. Economically committed customers, however, may be less sensitive to softer, more affective enhancing elements of customer experience.

These findings provide strong support of the need for new research into customer experience and customer commitment. Several areas of research into these concepts are of

critical importance. First, as managers are unlikely to track and manage all relevant elements of customer experience, researchers need to identify empirically the most salient attributes of customer experience with particular emphasis on those elements that enhance commitment to the firm or brand. Second, research needs to be conducted that specifically examines the differing impact of the five dimensions of commitment on customers' perceptions of their experiences (including, but not limited to the CE of satisfaction explored here). These findings should offer insight into service design to correspond with specific commitment and experience dimensions.

Additionally, we note three customer experience-specific issues worthy of further consideration. First, each of the five senses has empirically highlighted relationships with emotional and cognitive responses. Relatedly, Bitner (1992) recognized that, despite the firm-controlled nature of servicescapes, customers are also affected by social and natural stimuli within the service environment. Consequently, it seems there is a contribution from the sensorial and the physical to the emotional, cognitive and social elements of the customer experience. From a measurement perspective, it may therefore be more parsimonious to measure at the emotional, cognitive, physical and social level, applying specific sensory measures only in the event that a detailed diagnostic is required. The research of Zomerdijk and Voss (2010) could bring some clarity into this complex area. Their classification of services as consumption-centric, social-centric, and experience-centric categories may offer guidelines as to which physical and sensorial aspects are likely to be impactful in a particular service setting. Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011), for instance, propose that a customer using a consumption-centric service, such as a self-service technology, may react more strongly to physical dimensions, while a customer within an experience-centric context, such as a theatre, may respond more strongly to the setting's social, socially symbolic, and natural dimensions.

Second, although measures assess the effect of individual or multiple sensorial and physical dimensions, it is the overall and holistic assessment of the physical environment and the related sensorial experiences that dictates customers' response to it (Mari and Poggesi, 2013). Sensory perception itself is dynamic and not a single event (Piggott, 2000). Consequently, accurate and informative measurement of the sensory elements of customer experience requires a continuous, real-time functionality. Additionally, in generating information for the customer, the five senses rarely function in isolation. Rather, customer experiences are typically multi-sensory (Cornil and Chandon, 2015) with associations between sensory features. Consequently, measures of the sensory elements of customer will need to reflect this multi-sensory integration.

Third, customer responses to physical and associated sensory stimuli are moderated by various individual characteristics. For instance, responses to visual cues within a physical environment are impacted by customer involvement and atmospheric responsiveness (Eroglu *et al.*, 2003) while individuals vary in their 'need for touch' (Peck and Childers, 2003). Furthermore, studies show that reactions to music vary with age (Gulas and Schewe, 1994) and gender (Raajpoot *et al.*, 2008; Yalch and Spangenberg, 1993). While this is by no means an exhaustive list of possible moderating factors, it further highlights the multi-dimensional nature of CE and the requirement to capture individual customer characteristics when measuring its cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial and social elements.

In summary, understanding the relationship between customer experience and customer commitment is critical to achieving what Peter Drucker described as the goal of every business: "To create a customer" (Drucker, 1974, p. 61). The complexity of the experience and its relationship to commitment, however, helps explain why firms often fail to deliver exceptional experiences for their customers. Nonetheless, by continually advancing our understanding, service researchers can provide managers with important insights into not only the challenges but

also potential solutions for holistically managing customer experience. We are hopeful that this

research will catalyze further examination of these questions in a variety of service contexts.

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FIGURE 1

Framework for Examining the Relationship Between Customer Experience and Customer
Commitment

Customer experience (CE)

Cognitive element
- Goal attainment
- Expectation confirmation

Emotional element
- Positive or negative
- Types of emotions (e.g. anger, delight)

Physical & sensorial element
- Servicescape, ambient conditions, spatial and layout, signs, symbols & artifacts

Social element
- Staff, other customers, social network

Research gap: no research on the relationship between CE and CC

Possibilities for this relationship:
CE→CC   CC→CE   CE↔/↺CC   CE↮CC

Existing research on proxies for CE and CC, supported by theory

Proxy for customer experience:

Customer satisfaction (SAT)

Findings:
SAT→LOY
LOY→SAT

Proposition:
LOY↔SAT
LOY↺SAT

Proxy for customer commitment:

Customer Loyalty (LOY)

Customer commitment (CC)

Affective commitment
- Emotional attachment

Normative commitment
- bond based upon an obligation/duty

Forced commitment
- general belief that he/she has few alternatives

Habitual commitment
- not guided by consumer attitudes or intentions

Economic commitment
- customers cognitive appraisals of his or her investment in the brand/provider