Service encounters, experiences and the customer journey: Defining the field and a call to expand our lens

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Service researchers have emphasized the importance of studying the service experience, which encompasses multiple service encounters. Although the reflection on a series of service encounters has increased, the scope of research in this space remains narrow. Service research has traditionally concentrated on understanding, measuring and optimizing the core service delivery. While this focused lens has generated extraordinary knowledge and moved service research and practice forward, it has also resulted in a narrowly focused research field. The authors present a framework to guide comprehensive service experience research. Broadly, they define (1) pre-core service encounter, (2) core service encounter, and (3) post-core service encounter as distinct periods within a service experience. Further, they review the literature and put forward important research questions to be addressed within and across these periods. Finally, they argue that researchers need to consider simultaneously all periods of the service experience to make valuable contributions to the literature.

1. Introduction

From a service research perspective, relationships are built from a series of encounters with a firm (Voorhees, Fombelle, Allen, Bone, & Aach, 2014), and top managers today are expanding their strategies to design and manage the entire process the customer goes through to have a good experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). It is during this full series of encounters that customers make judgments about the firm’s quality, and each encounter contributes to customers’ overall satisfaction and willingness to continue the relationship (Bitner, 1990; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Biter & Wang, 2014; Bolton & Drew, 1992; Woodside, Frey, & Daly, 1989). However, the focus of service research for the past three decades has often been on understanding, measuring and optimizing the core service delivery and ensuring that the moments when the customer is “in the factory” are perceived as being excellent. But what happens leading up to the core and after the core has received less attention.

We argue that this narrowed focus on the core service delivery has caused service researchers and managers not fully to recognize evolving customer needs for a holistic service experience, which spans all potential service encounters (or touchpoints) with the firm. In this absence, service scholars may be overlooking opportunities to enhance the service experience; and, as a result, our research discipline runs the risk of painting an incomplete picture of the service experience. By taking a holistic view of the customer experience (pre-core-post), firms may be able to strengthen relationships with their most valuable customers and, in turn, increase customer retention, positive word-of-mouth and profitability.

For example, Tomorrowland—a festival of dance music in Belgium—is an organization fully embracing a holistic view of customer experience. Compared to most music festivals that last only a few days, Tomorrowland generates a year-long experience that climaxes around two weekends of shows presented in July. Tomorrowland has created a community—called People of Tomorrow—which is very active on social media. The managers make sure to provide constant materials to their community twelve months per year by providing relevant music, videos and information. The festival organizes many pre-core activities (e.g., a variety of traveling and accommodation...
packages, opportunities of co-traveling, etc.) and post-core activities (e.g., a detox day, an “after-festival” movie, etc.) so that the managers can connect with their customers before and after the festival.

Consistent with the Tomorrowland example, recent research conceptualized customer experience “as a customer’s journey with a firm over time during the purchase cycle across multiple touchpoints” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 6). Thus, to truly understand how service firms can build and maintain lasting relationships, managers and researchers alike must not focus solely on the core service provision. Other authors have also recently called for research on the enhancement of service experiences (Gustafsson et al., 2015; Ostrom et al., 2015) and an inclusive view of all touchpoints within a service experience (Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, & Tse, 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Although this prior work has been foundational for service marketing, these previous reviews stop short of providing a critical review of research outside the lens of the core service encounter. A framework that focuses on the integration of the pre-core, core and post-core service encounters is still needed.

The current article strives to address this gap by focusing on reviewing and expanding the definitions of service encounter, by giving more attention to the “pre-core” and “post-core” periods, by discussing the “interdependencies” between the three encounter periods, and by highlighting the importance of strategically investing resources across the three encounter periods. In doing so, we hope to provide a framework that can play a role in launching another wave of service research that focuses on the linkage between the three encounter periods. To accomplish this, we have organized the article into three sections. First, we define and differentiate service encounters and service experiences, such that previous conceptualizations are reconciled with those of the newly-defined time periods. In this section, we define pre-core service encounter, core service encounter and post-core service encounter as the three distinct periods that make up a service experience. Second, we present a literature review and a research agenda for each type of service encounter. Third, we highlight the importance for firms to redistribute their resources across the three encounter periods and not to focus strictly on the core service encounter. In this last section, we discuss other potential models in which more emphasis is given to “pre-core” and “post-core” periods, depending on the competitive situation of a firm.

2. Service encounters versus the service experience

There has been inconsistency in the terminology used to refer to customer-firm or customer-employee interactions in service contexts. In light of the need for a comprehensive service experience framework, especially problematic is the interchangeable use of the terms “service encounter” and “service experience.” To suggest a specific protocol regarding the future use of these terms, we consider a recent take on their conceptualizations, and adapt the definitions of service encounter and service experience accordingly. In their review of the literature on service encounters and service experiences, Bitner and Wang (2014) illuminate the distinction and relationship between the terms. The distinction essentially lies in the discreteness of service encounters (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994) and the continuous nature of a service experience. In presenting a broadened framework for service experience research, we adhere to this distinction and extend the conceptualization of each term to account for the newly-defined pre-core, core, and post-core service encounter periods within a service experience.

In line with Bitner and Wang (2014), we define service encounter as any discrete interaction between the customer and the service provider relevant to a core service offering, including the interaction involving provision of the core service offering itself. This definition encompasses pre- and post-core encounters as well as those built into the core service provision as “moments of truth” that influence cumulative customer outcomes. Encounters have many forms and can be face-to-face in an actual service setting or online; they can also be over the phone, through the mail or even by catalogue (Bitner, Brown, & Meuter, 2000). Moments of truth are described as critical encounters between customers and firms that significantly impact customers’ impressions of the firm and consumption (Beaujean, Davidson, & Madge, 2006; Bitner & Wang, 2014; Löfgren, 2005). While each service encounter is discrete, an element of customer impressions and satisfaction with the service provider is cumulative. Therefore, spillover of these outcomes from earlier service encounters accentuates the importance of a well-defined view of the overall service experience. The touchpoints are a service provider’s way to facilitate the service encounter and create interactions with customers; for instance, they can be online platforms, physical environments or catalogues.

Thus, we define service experience as the period during which all service encounters relevant to a core service offering may occur. This concept comprises pre- and post-core encounters, as well as the encounters built into the core service provision as “moments of truth” that influence customer outcomes. This conceptualization widens the lens through which we view service experience by highlighting the pre-core, core and post-core service encounter periods. These distinct periods also provide an approach to organizing extant and future research on service experience. Indeed, this broadened view facilitates research not only on individual service encounters within a single period, but also on the dynamics of customer experience across these periods. Fig. 1 provides a graphical overview of the relationships between various service encounters and the service experience. Next, we elaborate on the distinct features of the core, pre-core and post-core encounters.

There are other researchers that have found it meaningful to point out the presence of different phases in the consumption process. Alderson (1965) makes the distinction between “sort” and “transformation.” The sort phase entails bringing resources to a place (raw material and infrastructure) and the transformation phase adds form, space and time utilities. The chain of sorts and transformations can be very long. In turn, Grönroos (1998) argues that consumption of a service is a process consumption rather than an outcome consumption, where a consumer or user perceives the service production process as part of the service consumption. Moeller (2008) distinguishes among the following phases: facilities, transformations and usage. Similarly, Edvardsson and Olson (2006) subdivide the service into three dimensions: prerequisites for the service, process and outcome. The prerequisites refer to the infrastructure for the service and the outcome. Further, from a more resource perspective, Fliess and Kleinaltenkamp (2004) separate the periods into potential, process and outcome. Although these approaches are related to ours, we suggest a different conceptualization to capture the different aspects of an experience.

The core service encounter period is defined as the time interval during which the primary service offering is provided to the customer. The primary service fulfills a foundational customer need, which is the focal motivation that leads customers to engage with the service provider. This period—often referred to as the moment in which the customer is “in the factory”—has been researched extensively, with the literature investigating the core interactions between customers and employees, other customers, technologies (e.g., Bitner et al., 2000), and the service environment (e.g., Bitner, 1992). For example, this stage includes activities like delivering a lecture, receiving an annual physical from a doctor, staying at a hotel, or having a meal at a restaurant. While previous research has suggested the importance of encounters throughout the service experience, including the periods outside of the core service encounter (Bitner, 1995), there is less research that formally examines the encounters before and after the core service encounter (see Lemon and Verhoef (2016) for a recent exception). Table 1 provides a review of several studies that provide a knowledge base for managing core encounters. In contrast with the core service encounter period, the function and purposes of the pre-core and post-core service encounters exist mainly in reference to the core service.

We define pre-core service encounter period as the time interval
preceding the core service encounter that focuses on leading customers to engage with the firm in the core-service encounter. This period may encompass multiple service encounters. Chronologically the first of three defined service experience stages, the pre-core encounter period has received less attention from service researchers, despite its suggested importance for customer loyalty (Bitner, 1995). Specifically, the pre-core encounter takes place when customers either begin reviewing information about a firm’s offering or make initial contact with the firm. Instances of pre-core encounters include seeking information from online reviews, addressing initial and exploratory questions to frontline employees, and onboarding processes (see our research review). In terms of examples, this stage includes activities like orientation for students in new graduate programs, paperwork that precedes a doctor’s appointment, reviewing information about a hotel on TripAdvisor, or interacting with Jetblue on Twitter prior to using this airline.

While there has been ample past research on consumer decision making prior to purchase, much of it has been product focused (Punj & Staelin, 1983; Moorthy, Ratchford, & Talukdar, 1997) and set

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Primary topic</th>
<th>Key findings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bitner (1995)</td>
<td>Service relationships as making and keeping promises</td>
<td>There are three key activities in service relationships: (1) Making Promises (External Marketing), (2) Keeping Promises (Interactive Marketing) (3) Enabling (Employees to keep) Promises (Internal Marketing). Not all encounters are equally important. Encounters early in a service experience tend to influence loyalty to a greater extent than others. Service organizations can be categorized based on two dimensions: (1) physical complexity and (2) actor within servicescape (customer only, customer and employee, or employee only).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitner (1992)</td>
<td>Servicescapes: Physical surroundings and their influence on customer and employee behaviors</td>
<td>Customer involvement and the provision of alternatives in technology-infused service encounters are recommended in an effort to leverage technology to accomplish three goals: (1) customization and flexibility, (2) effective service recovery, and (3) spontaneous customer delight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitner, Brown, &amp; Meuter (2000)</td>
<td>Infusion of technology in service encounters</td>
<td>Three stages of service provision are identified: facilities, transformation, and usage. The stages differ in terms of resource origin (company or customer), autonomy of decision-making (integrative or autonomous), and value (potential value, value-in-transformation, and value-in-use).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, and Mandel (2013)</td>
<td>Branded service encounters</td>
<td>A uniform appearance among frontline employees is effective when it brings feelings of similarity to customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founders, Rabin, and Close (2015)</td>
<td>Aesthetic labor, frontline employee appearance</td>
<td>Simultaneous consideration of service quality, service value, and satisfaction reconciles previously fragmented streams of research on these constructs and their relationships. Service quality and service value have indirect effects on behavioral intentions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronin, Brady, &amp; Hult (2000)</td>
<td>Effects of service quality, service value, satisfaction, and perceived sacrifice on behavioral intentions (repatronage, recommendation intentions)</td>
<td>Service blueprinting is “a customer-focused approach for service innovation and service improvement” (p. 2). The portrayal of a service via this technique facilitates the design of service innovations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolton et al. (2014)</td>
<td>Customer “journey” as opposed to core service exclusively as strategy</td>
<td>Within perceived service quality there are three dimensions: (1) outcome quality, (2) interaction quality, and (3) environmental quality. Each of the components need to be perceived as reliable, responsive, and empathetic.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Conceptual model of service encounters throughout the service experience.
in the consumer behavior realm. Recent work by Moeller (2008) and Johnson et al. (2012) highlights the important interdependency between companies and customers in the decision-making process. Johnson et al. (2012) suggest examples of various strategies, or “nudges,” a company could use to influence decision making in the pre-core process. Service encounters that occur during this time interval include various types of service information search, such as offline and online contact with other customers, taking recommendations, and reviewing online information sources (e.g., focal firm, competitor, third party websites, etc.). In fact, more and more of the choices consumers make involve the use of some form of information technology (Murray, Liang, & Häubl, 2010). Although some of the aforementioned service encounters have been addressed in extant research (e.g., Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Mitra, Reiss, & Capella, 1999; Mortimer & Pressey, 2013)—especially with the increased use of technology—future research in this area will benefit from the distinction of the pre-core service encounter period. The pre-core encounter ends when the delivery of the primary service offering begins. See Table 2 for a review of studies examining pre-core encounters.

Finally, the post-core service encounter period is defined as the time interval following the core service encounter during which customers assess and act on their experience in the two previous periods. Through this period, the firm’s goal is to retain customers and to improve future service experiences. Post-core encounters include, for instance, pro-active firm activities (e.g., the receipt of a survey, a request for social media posting, etc.), any situations involving a complaint, or a firm’s actions to sustain a relationship with the customer over time. If done properly, effective actions in the post-core service period can flow into future pre-core service encounters, thus extending the experience loop. Researchers have studied key encounters within this period, acknowledging the importance of the encounters following provision of the core service. Specifically, service recovery efforts (Dong, Evans, & Zou, 2008; Smith & Bolton, 2002) and relationship development (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) are two topics that have received much attention in this field. In addition, this period includes promising topics, such as customer provision of feedback (i.e., via post-transaction surveys), customer reviews and service recommendations. Table 3 provides a listing of representative articles on post-core encounters.

3. Research review and agenda

While much service research has focused on the core, there is still the existence of a base of knowledge on how to conceptualize and manage both pre- and post-core encounters. In the following sections, we provide a more granular discussion of specific research in each area and then explicitly identify research questions that, if addressed, can advance knowledge in these areas. Table 4 provides a summary discussion of these major topics within each type of encounter as well as specific research questions within each topic area.

3.1. Pre-core service encounter

Establishing a clear cutoff for the end of the pre-core and the start of the core service is a challenge, and the lines governing these distinctions will continually evolve with customer expectations, technology, and changes in customer behavior. However, at present, we have identified four topic areas that we think represent a variety of pre-core encounters. Specifically, we believe that awareness building activities, customers’ information search, initial contact and onboarding phases all represent critical pre-core encounters that could impact the holistic service experience. Next, we briefly introduce initial research efforts in each of these four areas and then provide a discussion of important research questions for each of them.

3.1.1. Awareness building

3.1.1.1. Current knowledge. While brand awareness has been acknowledged as a dimension of brand equity across tangible goods and service contexts (Kimpackorn & Tocquer, 2010), building service brand awareness has received less attention from researchers. Berry (2000) developed a model of service branding, highlighting brand meaning as the primary driver of brand equity. Berry explained that, in a service context, customer experience has greater influence on brand equity than brand communications and a company’s presented brand; he ultimately viewed brand awareness as a secondary driver of brand

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Primary topic</th>
<th>Key findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zeithaml (1981)</td>
<td>Compares goods and services in terms of how they are evaluated, introduces search, experience, credence</td>
<td>The framework of search, experience, and credence qualities of goods (Nelson 1970; Darby and Karni 1973) is extended to services. Services are generally high in credence qualities, while goods are generally higher in search qualities, making the evaluation of services generally more difficult than the evaluation of goods. Perceived risk is lowest for search and highest for credence services. Customers informing credence service purchases take more information search time than either those informing search or experience services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitra et al. (1999)</td>
<td>S-E-C service types and perceived risk, information search</td>
<td>Credence and non-credence service consumers do not differ in terms of the comprehensiveness of their information search, but credence service consumers use salespeople, friends, and consumer reports as information sources more than non-credence service consumers. Interpersonal Variables: When WOM is actively sought it has greater influence on purchase decision. The same is true for tie strength, and tie strength is directly related to how actively WOM is sought. Non-interpersonal Variables: Receiver expertise is negatively associated with risk, and greater risk is associated with more active search for WOM. Service separation increases customers’ perceptions of access convenience, benefit convenience, performance risk, and psychological risk. For credence services, the effects on convenience are mitigated, and the effects on risk are magnified. Online reviews are perceived as more credible when reviewer personal identifying information (PII) is present. Ambivalent reviews accompanied by reviewer PII reduce booking intentions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortimer and Pressey (2013)</td>
<td>S-E-C services and comparing credence services to non-credence (search, experience) services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bansal and Voyer (2000)</td>
<td>Moderators of WOM influence on purchase decision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keh and Pang (2010)</td>
<td>Service separation: “customers’ absence from service production, which denotes the spatial separation between service production and consumption.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xie et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Influence of information source (reviewer) credibility: Personal identifying information (PII)</td>
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equity. As recent research has retained brand awareness as an important factor in service brand equity (e.g., Marquardt, Gollicic, & Davis, 2011), the distinctions between brand awareness and its achievement for services versus tangible goods have yet to be explored.

3.1.2. Research questions. There are some important questions that still need to be answered to further understand how to build awareness for services. The extant literature does not address how and whether there are differences in building awareness for services compared to more traditional products. Since customer expectations are being formed in the pre-core stage, future work should explore how awareness campaigns for services shape customer expectations. How can pre-core awareness initiatives create new moments of truth that have implications for later stages of the service delivery process? More specifically, can firms strategically manage those initial touchpoints to enhance customers’ desires for an offering, without inflating their expectations so high that it would be hard to satisfy them during the core experience? Similarly, in contexts where service literacy is needed, is it beneficial to make consumers aware of not just the service brand but details about the core service process? In these instances, firms may be able not only to attract, but also to better prepare consumers for a service.

In addition to the content of awareness building efforts, there are multiple channels and media that could be used to build awareness for services. Service research should explore how social media tools can be leveraged in service branding and building customer awareness. For instance, there are a growing number of virtual sales assistants that are designed to aid customers in their search for services. Future work should examine the differences in search engine marketing strategies needed for services (versus physical goods) given their high credence qualities. Another interesting area here would be to examine how effective online communities are at generating brand awareness. Work by Thompson and Sinha (2008) highlights different types of online communities and their impact on new product adoption. Future research should seek to understand how brand awareness is created in these various types of online communities.

3.1.2.1. Current knowledge. To date, the most prolific pre-core encounter research area focuses on service information search. Zeithaml (1981) initially contrasted services to products in terms of how they are evaluated by customers on the basis of the search, experience, and credence (S-E-C) qualities framework (these qualities are listed in ascending order of evaluation difficulty). This framework then served as the foundation for the S-E-C-based services typology in the subsequent literature on customer information search (Mitra et al., 1999). Research on information search has largely been concerned with customer perceived risk (Bansal & Voyer, 2000), review credibility (Keh & Pang, 2010; Xie, Miao, Kuo, & Lee, 2011), and outcomes such as purchase, repatronage and WOM intentions (Mitra et al., 1999). The S-E-C service typology defines service categories for which researchers have identified different drivers leading to different outcomes (e.g., Mitra et al., 1999) as well as moderators in more complex models of customer information search (Keh & Pang, 2010). Nonetheless, this stream of literature is limited and fragmented, yielding results that are difficult to generalize and reconcile (e.g., Mitra et al., 1999; Mortimer & Pressey, 2013).

3.1.2.2. Research questions. While there has been extensive research on information search, there are questions that still remain unanswered relating to information search, specifically for services. One possible direction for future research is to explore the different sources of information (personal, firm, etc.), and the different impact these sources have on customer expectations and service evaluations. Since there is a growing amount of information that customers may use to evaluate a service, firms need to know whether they can influence the relative importance of attributes during the information search, and how best to do this. While traditional information search was limited to a few key sources (firm sponsored media and consumer generated media), customers today have many new sources of information. Future research should examine the impact of these new sources, such as...

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Table 3
List of articles on post-core service encounter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Primary topic</th>
<th>Key findings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watson et al. (2015)</td>
<td>Attitudinal, behavioral loyalty meta-analysis</td>
<td>Attitudinal and behavioral loyalty differ in terms of the effects of their antecedents (e.g., satisfaction) as well as their effects on behavioral versus objective performance outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith and Bolton (2002)</td>
<td>Emotional response to service failure, service recovery evaluations</td>
<td>Customers who respond with greater negative emotions to service failures tend to be less (cumulatively) satisfied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Du, Fan, &amp; Feng (2011)</td>
<td>Customer and employee emotions, service failure and recovery</td>
<td>During service failure, negative emotional displays on the part of employees increase customer negative emotions. During service recovery, displays of positive employee emotions can reduce negative emotions on the part of the customer. Customer participation in service recovery drives value co-creation intentions through increased customer role clarity, perceptions of value for future co-creation, and satisfaction with the service recovery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong, Evans, &amp; Zou (2008)</td>
<td>Co-created service recovery</td>
<td>Over time, grudge-holding customers’ desire for revenge decreases, and their desire for avoidance increases. These negative outcomes are stronger for customers who were engaged in stronger relationships, although compensation best offsets these effects for those customers. In the context of an unsatisfactory recovery from a service failure, customer betrayal motivates retaliation. This effect is stronger in strong service relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregoire &amp; Fisher (2008)</td>
<td>Customer betrayal, retaliation</td>
<td>Customer expectations of relationship continuity reduce the effects of service failure on post-recovery satisfaction with the service through reduced recovery expectation, as customers with greater continuity expectations attribute the failure to a more temporary cause.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joireman, Gregoire, Devezer, &amp; Tripp (2013)</td>
<td>When do customers give firms “second chance”?</td>
<td>Customers may respond positively to failed service recoveries, as perceptions of a firm’s motive mediates effect of service recovery failure on anger, desire for revenge, and desire for reconciliation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hess, Ganesan, &amp; Klein (2003)</td>
<td>Service firm-customer relationships, service failure</td>
<td>Customer expectations of relationship continuity reduce the effects of service failure on post-recovery satisfaction with the service through reduced recovery expectation, as customers with greater continuity expectations attribute the failure to a more temporary cause.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver (1999)</td>
<td>Customer loyalty vs. customer satisfaction</td>
<td>Customer loyalty is not a feasible outcome for certain product categories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeithaml, Berry, &amp; Parasuraman (1996)</td>
<td>Effects of service quality on behavioral intentions</td>
<td>Service quality’s effect on behavioral intentions varies across dimensions of behavioral intentions (loyalty, intentions to switch, willingness to pay more, complaining intentions).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
online communities, third-party review sites (i.e., Yelp, Trip Advisor, Amazon.com) and social networks. Also, firm strategies to influence service adoption must consider customer differences in service literacy; managers should not assume that all customers are capable of making complex service decisions. For example, how can firms help low service literacy consumers gather better information and ultimately make better decisions? In relation to this, when making decisions, Tversky (1992) demonstrate that increased choice leads consumers to defer choices, even when the available options are all acceptable.

3.1.3. Initial contact
3.1.3.1. Current knowledge. The importance of a customer’s first encounter with a firm has been acknowledged by researchers. The quality of this initial contact can retain or drive away customers. Initial contact may be made as part of a customer’s information search and can take the form of a face-to-face, voice-to-voice, or computer-to-computer encounter (Whiting & Donthu, 2006). While initial contact with customers made by salespeople has received substantial research attention (e.g., Miao & Evans, 2013), little research has addressed the importance of this customer-initiated encounter that can vary in terms of its purpose and medium across service contexts.

3.1.3.2. Research questions. The initial contact is a critical area for the adoption and usage of a new service. As there are multiple touchpoints with customers, firms need to know how important the first touchpoint is in driving conversion among consumers, and how these initial contacts shape customer expectations. Specifically, is it better for firms to start with an average experience and continually increase the quality as they progress through the process? Moreover, how should the initial touchpoint be leveraged? Should service firms extract information from consumers about their ideal experience to better customize the service, or would this initiative inflate consumers’ expectations, making it too difficult to deliver the promised service? Finally, recent research (Giebelhausen et al. 2014) demonstrates that consumers have different reactions to human versus technology-based service encounters, and future studies could extend this to better understand what types of media are most efficient at the beginning.

3.1.4. Onboarding
3.1.4.1. Current knowledge. As researchers have turned their attention from service encounters to service experiences (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), customer onboarding—defined as the process of familiarizing a customer with a firm’s service offering—has emerged as an important research area. How a firm initially engages with a customer to bring her or him into the service is crucial for future success. For example, Rawson, Duncan, and Jones (2013) highlight that a series of well-managed individual encounters may be insufficient to “onboard” a customer when ongoing issues remain unresolved. This result suggests that all encounters—at different time periods—should be simultaneously considered to understand onboarding decisions. All in all, customer onboarding is a process that should be prioritized for future research.

3.1.4.2. Research questions. While there is little academic research on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Important research questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-core service encounter</td>
<td>● What are the most effective ways for firms to build awareness and effectively manage expectations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>● How can service firms leverage social media to develop a service brand and awareness?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information search</td>
<td>● Are different search engine marketing strategies needed for services (versus physical goods) given their high credence qualities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial contact</td>
<td>● Can firms influence the relative importance of attributes during the information search phase?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onboarding</td>
<td>● Do sources of information (personal, firm, etc.) differentially impact customer expectations and ultimately evaluations of service?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting the core with the pre- and post-core service encounters</td>
<td>● How can firms help low service literacy consumers gather better information and ultimately make better decisions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological interdependencies</td>
<td>● What is the extent of the role of technology in value creation during different encounters?</td>
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<td>Organizational interdependencies</td>
<td>● How can mobile technologies, Internet of Things and cloud-based systems enable the creation of seamlessly connected customer experiences across the encounters?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temporal interdependencies</td>
<td>● How can the organization of the service provider entity – a firm or a network of firms – be designed to ensure adequate coordination (intra-firm and/or inter-firm) across the encounters?</td>
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<td>Post-core service encounter</td>
<td>● How can the extent of decoupling be employed across the encounters?</td>
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<td>Failure and recovery</td>
<td>● To what extent can the organization of the service provider entity – a firm or a network of firms – be designed to ensure adequate coordination (intra-firm and/or inter-firm) across the encounters?</td>
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<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>● How can relevant customer information be captured and shared across encounters?</td>
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<td>Proactive firm activities</td>
<td>● How can firms manage expectations, satisfaction and emotions across encounters?</td>
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service onboarding, practitioners have made onboarding an important step in the customer journey. For example, practitioner work in service operations demonstrates how digitization and technology are simplifying the customer onboarding experience in financial services (Desmet, Markovitch & Paquette, 2015). In addition, firms and customers are investing significant resources in onboarding activities without knowing whether such activities are necessary in all situations, or if they are most critical when service literacy is most important. Future research should explore the costs and benefits of onboarding activities across multiple service contexts. Customer service onboarding can be delivered through different mediums and channels. Future research should explore what the optimal balance of human interaction and technology in onboarding processes is, and how frontline employees can provide the best onboarding experience. From a firm’s perspective, another interesting research stream should examine the impact of frontline employees on the customer onboarding process. Frontline employees play a major role in customers’ choices to adopt a new service. Finally, for firms to capitalize on the investment in onboarding activities, it is important for research to address how firms can increase customer participation in onboarding efforts, and whether investing in onboarding is more important in business-to-business settings versus business-to-consumer services.

3.2. Connecting the core with the pre- and post-core service encounters

The core service encounter period, as defined above, captures the customer-firm interactions that constitute the provision of the main service offering. While prior research has captured this critical period in isolation, much less is known about its role in connecting the pre-core and post-core encounters and how these should match to create a seamless service experience. In this section, we focus on reviewing research that addresses the ability of the core to serve as a binding agent that holds together a service experience, providing avenues for future research to better understand the nature of this relationship.

3.2.1. Current knowledge

The inherent importance of the core service encounter period has been widely recognized. The research in this area has centered on the various interactions that take place during this period, particularly customer interactions with employees (Bowen & Schneider, 2014), other customers (Nicholls, 2010), and technology (Dabholkar & Bagozzi, 2002). Additionally, the physical environment in which the core service encounter takes place has been found to influence these interactions and their outcomes (Bitner, 1992).

Service researchers have rightly acknowledged the importance of taking a holistic perspective on the customer journey, considering relevant interdependencies between sequential service encounters that contribute to the overall customer experience (Dhebar, 2013). Handoffs across consecutive encounters need to be carefully managed so that the customer does not fall through the cracks (Shapiro, Rangan, & Sviokla, 1992) and a seamless experience is provided (Ostrom et al., 2015). In fact, the customer experience has been defined as a customer’s cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory and social responses to a firm’s offerings over the purchase journey (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Especially challenging handoffs are those that involve change in interactive technologies (e.g., channels) (Sousa & Voss, 2006), change in the organizational entity (function or firm) that provides the encounters (Zomerdijk & de Vries, 2007), and significant time lags (Dhebar, 2013). Research has emphasized the need to pay attention to the sequence of encounters that comprise the service experience and how customer emotions evolve across the encounters (Dasu & Chase, 2010). For example, all things being equal, it seems desirable to conclude a sequence of encounters on a high note or to get the unpleasant parts out of the way early. Designing encounters and journeys with these considerations in mind will deliver the desired implicit or psychological outcomes of the service (Sivakumar, Li, & Dong, 2014).

Research on encounter interdependencies has focused on the core service encounter period. It has typically analyzed customer journeys starting with the arrival of the customer into the core service delivery system (the “factory”) and ending with check-out from this system, often neglecting the pre- and post-core periods. Both service providers and customers have very different goals and expectations for each of the three types of encounters. We argue that the interdependencies and handoffs between the core and the adjacent periods are especially challenging and have inherent characteristics that make them different from interdependencies across individual encounters within the core period.

First, in many of today’s services, internet-based channels play a key role in the pre- and post-core encounters (Sousa, Amorim, Pinto, & Ana Magalhães, 2016). At the same time, a large number of core services require the physical presence of the customer (e.g., health care, hospitality) or the processing of an object provided by the customer (e.g., dry cleaning). Therefore, the transition into/from the core encounter often implies change between virtual and physical channels of customer interaction, enacting important technological interdependencies.

Second, the primary function involved in the delivery of the pre-core and post-core encounters is often marketing or sales, whereas the operations function is a key factor in the core encounters. In addition, the use of different interactive technologies across the three periods frequently leads to the dedication of different organizational entities (functions or firms) to the delivery of the encounters in each period. For example, customer acquisition in the pre-core may be subcontracted to a specialist firm or organizational unit operating as an internet-enabled contact center. This results in significant organizational interdependencies between the core and the other periods.

Finally, there are usually important time lags between the three periods, during which customer circumstances, states of mind, and emotions may change significantly. This is especially salient in research-shopping instances in which customers use the Internet for information searching in the pre-core, but then resort to a physical facility to experience the service (Neslin & Shankar, 2009). In this case, there may be long time lags between the two periods, enacting important temporal interdependencies.

3.2.2. Research questions

A number of important questions associated with interdependencies between the core and the adjacent encounters remain under-researched. We want to highlight some questions that we feel are of importance for each category of interdependencies.

Concerning technological interdependencies, future research should revisit extant knowledge on technological integration in the specific context of the three encounter periods. Examples include understanding the impact on customers and employees of high-tech versus high touch service delivery across the three encounters, and examining how mobile technologies, Internet of Things, and cloud-based systems can enable the creation of seamless customer experiences across the encounters (Ostrom et al., 2015; Wueandelich et al., 2015).

With respect to organizational interdependencies, future research should explore new organizational designs for the service provider entity, which can be a firm or a network of firms. The service provider can create value platforms to help support the complete service process and thus create a seamless system for customers’ value creation. Such designs need to explicitly consider the unique nature of the three encounters and ensure adequate organizational coordination (intra-firm and/or inter-firm) across them. The notion of competition based on end-to-end customer journeys, supported by a cross-functional team, and led by a “journey manager” may be a promising avenue to study (Edelman & Singer, 2015).

It is also important to study the extent of decoupling what is desirable across the three encounters. Decoupling is defined as organi-
rationally separating activities by allocating them to different employees or groups of employees (Zomerdijk & de Vries, 2007). Highly coupled activities provide increased flexibility but do not take advantage of the ability to employ experts. Decoupling activities allows the subsystems to function independently and permits substitution of subsystems as needed to alter the system itself. Decoupled activities can be coordinated by designing appropriate service interfaces and by defining rules on what information to provide and to whom (de Blok, Meijboom, Luijks, Schols, & Schroeder, 2014). Future research might apply these service design principles to the organizational entities that support the three encounters.

Regarding temporal interdependencies, there is the need to devise measurement systems that capture information in one period that is not only relevant to the design and execution of the encounters in that period but also in the other periods. Especially relevant may be to capture relevant customer information for all experiential dimensions (cognitive, emotional, sensory, social, behavioral) throughout the three encounters and to share it with the entities involved in the provision of each encounter. For example, a firm needs to know what goal or task a customer wants to solve using different channels or during different stages of the customer journey. Failure to achieve a goal is likely to lead to negative emotions, such as frustration, and will affect the overall perception of the firm. Firms also have a tendency to store customer information in silos within the organization. For instance, customer perceptions and behavior on the Internet are not matched to customer perceptions and behavior in a store or when contacting customer service. Matching customer information enables companies to create a greater understanding of the customer experience during a complete customer journey and allows the investigation of relevant research questions, such as: How can firms manage expectations, satisfaction and emotions across encounters? How can relevant customer information be captured and shared across encounters? What role does the core play in relaying information and managing consistent expectations? To what extent does the customer’s state before or after the core impact the evaluation of the other encounters? How can information available in social media pertaining to the pre- and post-core be used to design and deliver the core? How can the information generated by Internet of Things and smart services in the core be employed to trigger and customize the post-core encounter?

### 3.3. Post-core service encounter

Traditionally, the service literature has somewhat overlooked the post-core encounter. The one notable exception is research on service failure and recovery. This focus likely emerged because this situation is often triggered by a customer complaint, throwing a post-core encounter back onto center stage. Beyond the literature on service failures, there are more opportunities in this area, particularly when researchers account for the roles the “pre-core” and “core” encounters could have on influencing customers in the post-core area. For example, Sridhar and Srinivasan (2012) demonstrate that product reviews that customers read (i.e., a pre-core encounter) impact their likelihood of sharing feedback following a transaction (i.e., a post-core encounter). In addition, a small set of “best in class” service organizations are proactively extending the service experience through the creation of new post-core encounters, such as posting “their memories” after vacations. In the following sections, we review different literatures—service failure and recovery, relationship development and firm-initiated contacts—examining post-core service encounters.

#### 3.3.1. Service failure and recovery

##### 3.3.1.1. Current knowledge

The literature on service failure and recovery examines the negative interactions after the “core” encounters. A service failure is a situation in which customers perceive that the “core service” delivery was below their expectations, whereas service recovery represents the efforts made to redress the initial failure. Most of this rich literature relies on a sequence “cognitions ➔ emotions ➔ outcomes,” which we follow next.

The most studied cognitions refer to justice or attribution theories, which are the objects of several meta-analyses. After a service failure, a natural tendency is to ask “why” the incident occurred and to use different attributions to answer this question. Two of these attributions—stability and controllability—have been widely studied in marketing. In their meta-analysis, Van Vaerenbergh, Yves, Vermeir, and Larivière (2014) found, for instance, that controllability has a stronger and more immediate effect on negative emotions than stability does. In turn, justice theory has been widely employed for understanding customers’ responses after a service recovery. Customers assess a firm’s recovery efforts according to three justice dimensions (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaran, 1998; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999): distributive (i.e., outcomes), procedural (i.e., policies or procedures) and interactional (i.e., interactions with employees). In their meta-analysis, Gelbrich and Rosch (2011) found that only distributive justice affects transaction-specific satisfaction. However, all three dimensions influence long-term satisfaction, according to the meta-analysis conducted by Orsingher, Valentini, and de Angelis (2010).

For the affective variables, research focusing on satisfaction (transaction-specific and overall) has dominated this literature (e.g., Gelbrich & Rosch, 2011). More recently, research started paying attention to negative emotions as mediators between cognitions and satisfaction (and other outcomes). Initially, researchers focused on general sets of negative emotions (Chebat & Slusarczyk, 2005). Recently, more emphasis has been put on discrete emotions, such as anger (i.e., Grégoire, Laufer, & Tripp, 2010) and rage (McColl-Kennedy, Patterson, Smith, & Brady, 2009). This literature now incorporates outcomes that go beyond Singh’s (1988) typology of complaint behaviors (i.e., voice, private and third-party responses). With the advent of social media, research has begun paying attention to responses such as online complaints, revenge and vengeance (Grégoire et al., 2010; Ward & Ostrom, 2006).

##### 3.3.1.2. Research questions

It would be interesting to understand the effects of locus of causality (Folkes, 1984), especially when customers are responsible for service failures with self-service technologies. This issue directly speaks to the notion of co-creation when customers recover on their own from a service failure in an online setting. A largely unexplored area suggests that customers could favorably respond to successful recoveries. Researchers could study positive emotions, such as joy and happiness, and other favorable outcomes, such as gratitude, acceptance, indebtedness, reconciliation and forgiveness. We could better understand the drivers leading to forgiveness and reconciliation—two beneficial outcomes for managers.

In terms of recovery, it is generally assumed that firms are fully responsible for satisfying customers after a failure. Here, there is an opportunity to study the initiatives that customers could take to “heal themselves” after major failures. From research on clinical psychology, customers could benefit from using self-expressive tools to vent their negative emotions and restructure the negative events. The use of such tools would be especially useful for highly personal failures (e.g., healthcare).

##### 3.3.2. Building stronger relationships

##### 3.3.2.1. Current knowledge

There is a rich literature that discusses positive post-core interactions and the development of strong relationships—which are broadly defined as the psychological connections customers perceive that they have with firms. These connections have been qualified by using numerous concepts. From this long list, trust and commitment arguably remain the cornerstones of strong relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust reflects the extent to which customers believe that a firm is dependable and reliable. In turn, commitment is defined as a customer’s enduring desire to maintain his or her relationship with a firm. Building on these two...
3.3.3.1. Current knowledge. While past research has examined how firms can react to both their successful and failed activities, there is also a new and expanding research on their proactive activities. For instance, firms can solicit customer feedback to engage them, regardless of the success or failure of past interactions. Proactive solicitation of feedback refers to firm-initiated communications that seek customer feedback on their offerings (Challagalla, Venkatesh, & Kohli, 2009). Past research has shown that asking customers for feedback influences customers' attitudes and behaviors in important ways (Malhotra, 2007). There are three core areas in this research realm: mere measurement effects of one’s own interactions in creating one’s own relationship. Given the advent of social media, it is now possible to witness others’ interactions with a firm; it is important to better understand how others’ exchanges affect one’s relationship. We also need to better understand the linkage between customer relationship and engagement. Is customer relationship a part of engagement? Relationship could also be modeled as an antecedent or an outcome of engagement. The linkage between these two central constructs needs to be better specified in the literature.

There is also a need for more research to better understand relationship termination and dissolution. So far, the focus has been on developing strong relationships, and only limited research relates to relationship dissolution; managers still need to know how to manage this final state of the lifetime cycle (Harmeling, Palmatier, Houston, Arnold, & Samaha, 2015).

3.3.3.2. Research questions. First, the current literature focuses mainly on the effects of one's own interactions in creating one's own relationship. The advent of social media has made it possible to witness others' interactions with a firm; it is important to better understand how others' exchanges affect one's relationship. We also need to better understand the linkage between customer relationship and engagement. Is customer relationship a part of engagement? Relationship could also be modeled as an antecedent or an outcome of engagement. The linkage between these two central constructs needs to be better specified in the literature.

4. Managing resources across the entire service experience

To this point, we have largely discussed how pre-core and post-core encounters operate in isolation, and the connections between these two types of encounters and the core service encounter. However, as previously noted, customers do not simply make assessments of service encounters; rather, they develop summary judgments of a firm based on all encounters that make up the service experience. This creates both challenges and opportunities for firms. Specifically, many firms can deliver excellence in the core, but may be suboptimal with pre- and post-core encounters because of a narrowed focus on the core encounter. In these instances, the lack of a complete quality service portfolio may leave customers dissatisfied and willing to switch. In parallel, a firm that can deliver all phases of the experience better than its competitors could realize benefits that far exceed those associated with a strong core encounter performance. As a result, it would be remiss to discuss a research agenda on the notions of encounter and experience without accounting for the potential of variance across the three encounter stages and their impact on customer evaluations. Fig. 2 provides a graphical depiction of different models that show variance across encounters.

4.1. Current service operations versus ideal standards

Specifically, the first panel (i.e., model 1) details our description of what we believe captures the current norm in the service industry; firms are delivering excellence in the core, but not fully leveraging the opportunities presented in the pre- and post-core encounters. As previously discussed, this approach could be risky. If competitors can gravitate toward our “Ideal” model (i.e., model 2) and provide improved performance across the board (i.e., pre-core-post), they would be able to capture customer share. In fact, we would contend that even delivering consistent, but slighter lower performance scores than those captured in our ideal setting could offer competitive gains over current practice and norms. Formal research investigations are needed to better understand the relative impact of the pre-core, core and post-core encounters on customer loyalty. Future research should also examine if variance across different types of encounters can erode evaluations of the experience. While most firms might obtain optimal benefits from delivering service just shy of ideal standards, the delivery of consistently excellent encounters (i.e., model 2) might be required.
4.2. Alternative models

4.2.1. Emerging model

The obvious move is to become ideal across the board and to do so in a manner that takes into account cost constraints. However, this ideal setting is likely not going to be realistic for many firms that simply cannot invest to become “best in class” in all major encounters. In these instances, where resources are constrained, it is likely they could experience differentiation in the pre- and post-core encounters with their limited budgets. An approach that assumes a good core experience and places a premium on differentiating in the “pre” and “post” stages is what we refer to as the emerging model (i.e., model 3). Firms could be motivated to adopt this model simply to take a run at being “best in class,” compared to the competition or for more tactical considerations.

In some contexts, the pre- and post-core encounters have increased importance to the extent that failure to deliver excellence at these stages could drastically erode the overall evaluation of the service experience. For example, when service literacy is critical, as in healthcare settings or financial services, the obvious move is to become ideal across the board and to do so in a manner that takes into account cost constraints. However, this ideal setting is likely not going to be realistic for many firms that simply cannot invest to become “best in class” in all major encounters. In these instances, where resources are constrained, it is likely they could experience differentiation in the pre- and post-core encounters with their limited budgets. An approach that assumes a good core experience and places a premium on differentiating in the “pre” and “post” stages is what we refer to as the emerging model (i.e., model 3). Firms could be motivated to adopt this model simply to take a run at being “best in class,” compared to the competition or for more tactical considerations.

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4.2.2. Other models for high and low switching costs

Alternatively, in industries that are dominated with high switching costs and often bind customers through contracts, an ideal model (see model 4) would likely feature an over-investment in pre-core encounters to build awareness, send positive quality signals to new customers, and onboard them into the relationship. Once this happens, contractual obligations can retain behavioral loyalty and firms could potentially divest in the core experience relative to the pre-core spending. A model like this would be common in telecommunications, insurance, and financial services.

In industries characterized by low switching costs (e.g., fast food or retail), delivering excellence in the core and post-core encounters (see model 4) would likely feature an over-investment in pre-core encounters to build awareness, send positive quality signals to new customers, and onboard them into the relationship. Once this happens, contractual obligations can retain behavioral loyalty and firms could potentially divest in the core experience relative to the pre-core spending. A model like this would be common in telecommunications, insurance, and financial services.

4.2.3. Toward a testable framework

On the basis of this discussion, we encourage future research to develop models and hypotheses predicting the relative levels of resources that firms should invest in the three stages of encounter. The first efforts should be devoted to identifying the key drivers that explain the variations in these relative levels of investment. From our
observations, we conclude that many of these drivers primarily relate to the competitive situation of a firm and the characteristics of its customers. In terms of competitive strategy, we have already discussed the potential effects of variables such as entry barriers, exit barriers and switching cost environment (high versus low). In terms of demand characteristics, key variables—such as need for information, level of service literacy and the perceived risks associated with a service—are probably natural drivers explaining the relative levels of investments in the three encounter stages. Last but not least, it is important to test the effects of different resource configurations on firm performance.

5. Call to action

As the service discipline continues to evolve, researchers must expand their lens beyond the core experience. Historically, researchers have observed over the core service encounter, and those decades of research have informed optimization efforts for those moments when the customer is “in the factory.” While these investments have resulted in gains in service excellence, they have also resulted in a form of service myopia, with too much emphasis on the core service encounters and not enough focus on the pre-core and post-core encounters. Specifically, by narrowly focusing on the core, researchers are missing opportunities to apply service theories and principles to the pre- and post-core encounters, where best-in-class firms are already beginning to differentiate. Ultimately, without widening our lens, service research runs the risk of becoming less relevant in the future.

References
