



Redefining Customer Experience in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Empirical Approach of Home Furnishings Retailer

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Abstract

One of the most important factors in succeeding in the commercial rivalry is customer experience. The Covid-19 pandemic, which was accompanied by a health and financial catastrophe, has altered the way that customers interact with brands. This study aims to map out strategic concerns that are the main factors in improving and identify customer experiences that happened during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were gathered for the study utilizing qualitative methodologies, including interviewing and employing tools for observation. With the aid of a phenomenological qualitative design model, the data were processed and examined. The findings of this study demonstrate that regulations in the implementation of health protocols, such as the employment of a queue system, the use of masks, and restrictions on enjoying props, also alter how customers enjoy the customer experience. To bridge the gap between customers' desire to enjoy an activity and their awareness of health dangers, businesses must introduce new mechanisms into the customer experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the study's findings, personal experience, social media, and constraints all have an impact on how customers experience the Covid-19 pandemic. This research has implications for providing a customer experience for business people, especially those related to furniture and similar businesses to create experiences that are in line with health principles and protocols in the post-Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, customer experience, customer satisfaction, health protocol, redefinition

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered peoples' life in many areas, including education, health, socialization, and business pursuits. Health threats and



economic issues have been brought on by the pandemic that has been going on since the end of December 2019, especially in Indonesia. The Economist predicts that the Covid-19 pandemic will take a while to end, especially in light of the appearance of new, deadly forms of the new Covid-19 virus (The Economist, 2021). Additionally, official regulations such as the Imposition of Emergency Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM), which are influenced by the emergency Covid-19 cases in Indonesia, are a significant barrier to business people's ability to adapt to and survive the Covid-19 pandemic (Farisa, 2021).

For enterprises who depend on customer experience as one of the values of the elements offered, the Covid-19 pandemic poses a significant challenge. The unique atmosphere, decorations, atmosphere, and ecosystem that customers have been able to enjoy up until this point have all been restricted in order to prevent the Covid-19 virus from spreading through human crowds. As a result, in order to adapt to shifting customer behavior and consumption patterns, firms must rethink the customer experience.

Customer experience is a holistic understanding of customer interactions with companies through various touch points, both physically and digitally through various communication channels and media. Lemon & Verhoef (2016) confirms that a good customer experience is the key to business success today. In addition, customer experience can be seen in 3 stages, namely before purchase, during purchase, and after purchase. The three stages that customers go through with integrated customer journey management will create a good customer experience and are expected to increase customer satisfaction and eventually become loyal customers.

The effectiveness of customer experience is studied in Bustamante & Rubio (2017) which explains that cognitive, affective, social, and physical factors need to be considered by business owners, especially in the retail business to create comfort and positive emotions, as well as stimulate buying behavior. In addition, the created customer experience must create a "wow" effect, so that customers who enjoy the experience can tell their experiences, and trigger the birth of positive words of mouth (WOM) in attracting new customers (Roy, 2018).

Additionally, it's crucial to focus on providing the millennial demographic with an exceptional and memorable experience. Due to the millennial generation's connection with technology and social media, information production and consumption can happen immediately when they contact with brands (Khan, Fatma, Kumar, & Amoroso, 2021).

To bind customers and eventually turn them into a devoted client base, interactions and customer experiences must take into account the customer journey both online and offline. Business owners must regularly manage and improve customer

experiences because sensory experiences have been shown to have a positive impact on customer satisfaction, particularly when these customer experiences are consistently managed and also provide new and higher expectations in customers (Lashkova, Antón, & Camarero, 2020).

The author's goal in doing this research is to identify and evaluate customer experiences that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, this study will attempt to identify the strategic problems that are crucial to enhancing the customer experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. In light of the company's success in generating customer experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for the residents of Bandung City and its environs, the research will be carried out using the IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan research object. A useful literature review is anticipated from this study in terms of philosophy and practice, particularly with regard to the redefining of the customer experience in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Customer Experience

The goal of the customer experience is to get customers to interact with the products or services in some way—either physically, emotionally, or by doing specific activities. Customer experience is a process that business people need to develop gradually because experience will be acquired after going through a process over a given amount of time. As a result, in order to give customers relevant experiences, every team, employee, and staff member in business must research and map out customer behavior (Mashingaidze, 2014).

Customer experiences are created as a result of the contact points and interactions that occur between customers and businesses and have the power to impact how customers feel, act, and value things. Additionally, the factors that influence the customer experience, such as personnel, the environment, technology, and other customers, contribute to impressions that shape the overall corporate image in terms of both the provision of goods and services and business operations (Sirapraha & Tocquer, 2012).

Customer experience can be divided into 5 types of strategic experience, namely sense, feel, think, act, and relate (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013).

1. Sense

Sense is the experience obtained by customers through the five senses in enjoying products/services, be it sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste.

2. Feel

Feel is the experience gained by customers through the nuances, impressions, and positive attitudes built by products/services that can affect customers' feelings and moods.

3. Think

Think is an experience gained by customers by involving cognitive, intellectual, and customer thinking in enjoying products/services.

4. Act

Act is an experience that customers get by involving interactions, lifestyles, and physical activities that can be felt by doing certain things differently.

5. Relate

Relate is the experience gained by customers by paying attention to the suitability between the values espoused by the product/service with the personality, preferences, and self-image of the customer.

Four components of the customer experience are created by engagement with the brand, either directly or indirectly. Cognitive, emotional, physical and sensory, and social characteristics are the four components of the customer experience (DeKeyser, Lemon, Klaus, & Keiningham, 2015).

1. Cognitive element

Cognitive elements are elements related to the achievement of goals and confirmation of expectations in the product/service consumption process.

2. Emotional element

Emotional elements are elements related to positive or negative influences and types of emotions.

3. Physical and sensory elements

Physical and sensory elements are man-made environments that are designed to support the experience gained, whether in the form of artifacts, music, lighting, layout, and signage. Meanwhile, online, physical and sensory elements can be judged by website features, such as design, ease of use, speed, and clear navigation.

4. Social element

The social element is the influence that staff, other customers, and social networks have on customers' experiences with brands. Interactions with employees, other customers, and reference groups that customers refer to, be it family, friends, and so on, can affect customers' experience of a brand.

2.2 Research Framework

The customer experience is crucial at every stage of the customer journey, including the pre-, during-, and post-purchase phases. Businesses need to focus on these several critical components. Customer experience is a gradual process that develops

from learning from prior experiences. The current experience will be connected to and linked with perceptions that customers will feel, get, and expect, and these projections will become influences that may shape experiences that may be passed in the future.

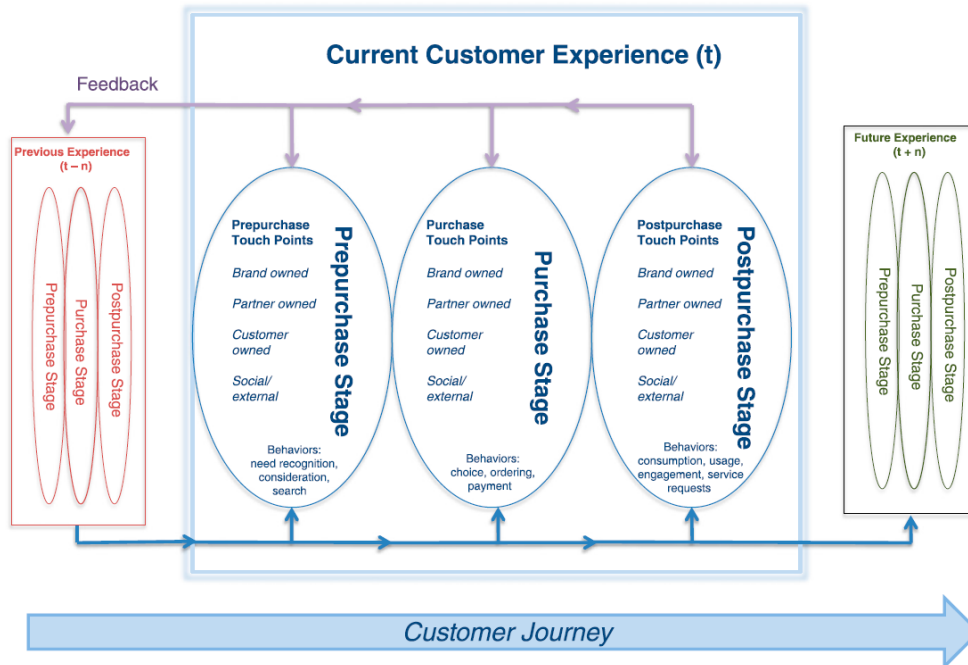


Figure 1. Customer Experience Model

Source: Lemon & Verhoef (2016)

Customers may base their opinions, assessments, and assumptions about goods, services, and the firm overall on behavior that impacts their experience during each phase. Customers chart out a variety of preliminary actions throughout the pre-purchase stage, including need identification, contemplation, and product/service search. This stage is characterized by information seeking, online browsing, checking brand accounts on social media, and consulting with family and friends who have used the company's goods and services in the past.

Customers will choose, order, and pay during the purchasing phase. Customers can choose for themselves after comparing the goods and services that they believe best suit their needs and preferences. Following the act of choosing, an order is placed with a decision that takes into account the terms and conditions of the good or service, and the process is completed with payment. The pre-purchase phase, when pleasant experiences are established to make sure the product or service purchased matches expectations, might lead to the buying phase.

Finally, consumption, use, attachment, and demand for services are all part of the post-purchase phase. This stage will be crucial in determining whether or not

customers will continue to use the company's goods and services. When customers are pleased with the goods or services provided by the business during the actual consumption process, the customer relationship might continue in later encounters. In contrast, customers are more inclined to reduce or stop their contact with a company when they feel that their experience has fallen short of their expectations.

The interactions between contact points controlled by businesses, partners, customers, and social/externals have an impact on customers during each phase. The encounter that is planned and overseen by the business, as well as the promotional media and marketing mix that the business has influence over, is the touch point that belongs to the brand. In contrast, partner-owned touch points are interactions and experiences that are created by a collaboration between businesses and partners, including marketing agents, distributors, vendors, and partner-owned communication platforms. When correctly handled, the touch points controlled by partners will strengthen both parties in addition to having an impact on the company's goods and services.

Customer touch points are decisions made directly by customers, uninfluenced by the business or its affiliates. Customers can autonomously complete the entire purchasing choice process, from the need identification process through the purchase decision process, in the contact points they own. The customer experience process has touch points that involve the customer's choice of delivery method, payment method, and user-generated content.

Last but not least, social and external touch points that influence customers subconsciously include social media, evaluations from other customers, referrals from friends and family, and elements of the promotional mix. Due to the power of validation, which can strengthen or decrease customer views of a product or service, this touch point is thought to have a considerable impact on the process of forming the customer experience among other touch points.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The research will be carried out using qualitative approaches, and equipment for interviewing and observing people will be used to collect data. A qualitative phenomenological design model is used to process and evaluate the data in order to define the circumstances and variables depending on the actual conditions. Researchers can identify and map customer experiences based on emergent phenomena using a phenomenological qualitative design paradigm (Bungin, 2020). IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan customers who have made at least one visit are the chosen research informants.

Determining the study phenomena, defining key phrases, crafting meaning, classifying themes, creating a comprehensive description, and providing a basic structure of research findings are the first steps in conducting research. By using three different sources, the veracity of the data was checked to verify its accuracy. This involved using primary data from fieldwork and interviews as well as secondary data from web articles and social media conversations.

4. RESULT

4.1. Strategic Issues in Customer Experience during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The customer experience during the Covid-19 pandemic includes a variety of strategic difficulties that can be divided into three stages: the pre-buy stage, the purchase stage, and the post-purchase stage.

Table 1. Stages in the Customer Experience during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Phase	Stage Before Purchase	Purchase Stage	Stage After Purchase
Element	Emotional (interested, bored)	WOW (novelty, holistic experience)	Togetherness
Main activity	- Social media observations from user generated content created by previous visitors/customers - The experience of visiting IKEA Alam Sutera	- Capture the moment on social media - Culinary experience - Me time/family time	- Share experiences with friends/family - Creating e-WOM elements through user generated content on social media
Challenge	High customer expectations for IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan	- Long queues in the parking lot and ensuring the implementation of health protocols goes well, especially when crowds occur - Availability of stock of groceries/snacks/ice cream	Ensuring service excellence until customers leave the parking lot

4.1.1. Cognitive Element

During the process of consuming a good or service, cognitive aspects are those that contribute to the accomplishment of objectives and validation of expectations.

Because of the many elements that are exhibited in every area of the space, appealing product displays enable customers to feel and envision existing products while they are in their homes. IKEA's knockoff furniture also develops buyers' creative design skills while increasing certain aspects of the experience after the purchase is made.

The majority of respondents to this study were not price sensitive to the customer experience offered by IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan, which is an intriguing conclusion from this study. A good mood indirectly influences a customer's purchase decision, which now includes an emotional component rather than just consideration of price.

4.1.2. Emotional Element

Emotional components are components linked to favorable or unfavorable impacts and various emotions. IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan has become a new source of entertainment for Bandung City residents as a result of boredom brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, whether it be window shopping, eating Swedish cuisine, or spending time with friends and family. IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan usually serves as a gathering spot for a variety of particular hobby communities as they indulge in the local cuisine because it is regarded as cozy and capable of delivering a pleasurable experience.

The extremely long lines at the entrance, especially on weekends and holidays in the parking lot, are evidence of how eager the neighborhood was to enjoy entertainment during the Covid-19 outbreak. Togetherness with friends, partners, and family also adds a pleasant emotional component to enjoying the available displays, props, and food, creating an impactful overall experience that will never be forgotten.

4.1.3. Physical and Sensory Elements

Physical and sensory components, such as artifacts, music, lighting, layout, and signs, are man-made surroundings created to assist the experience. Meanwhile, website attributes like design, usability, speed, and straightforward navigation can be used to evaluate online, physical, and sensory elements.

IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan offers its customers a planned experience. This is evident from the instructions to take full use of the experience as well as from the lighting on the display, which gives each aspect the appearance of being "alive." Visitors are free to interact with the numerous objects on the display for IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan's ideal home by touching, holding, sitting, sleeping, taking pictures, and trying to perform simulations.

In addition, the presence of typical Swedish cuisine encourages many visitors to take culinary tours while at IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan, in addition to appreciating

the store's perfectly curated interior design. IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan, which has a sizable building space, offers convenience for visitors to pass by and enjoy the various exhibits in terms of floor layouts, lighting, and room arrangement.

4.1.4. Social Element

The social component is the impact that personnel, other customers, and social networks have on customers' brand experiences. Customer experiences with brands can be impacted through interactions with staff members, other customers, and customer reference groups like family and friends.

User-generated content is a factor that subtly stimulates netizens' interest in the diverse experiences had by prior customers. People are encouraged to share and experience the same experiences as prior customers through various displays, gastronomic delights, and moments of togetherness that have been captured in photos, movies, or other sorts of content.

Some tourists were motivated by a sense of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) to take pictures and record the moment at various "must-see" locations at IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan, one of which being the renowned warehouse. When the researchers arrived, a crowd of guests were eager to stand in line to take pictures with the warehouse's towering backdrop for the purpose of sharing the images on social media. This serves as a catalyst and motivator for the subsequent visitors to join the current trend.

4.2. Experience as Fantasies, Feeling, and Fun

The term "customer experience" refers to an interaction that is cumulative from start to finish. Customers are subtly encouraged to develop their own storylines from their journey through the company's intended stories, whether it be when perusing galleries or displays or taking family photos in renowned warehouses.

When customers visit IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan, feel the numerous props, and try to simulate using them, their experience there may take the form of fantasy. The fantasy is made to feel real and enjoyable because to the interaction component. When spending time with family or friends, especially when trying and feeling things together, this engagement is further felt, resulting in group remarks and perceptions that may lead to impulsive purchases.

Visitors can feel how realistically each aspect of the product on display conveys the ideal piece of furniture for a home. There are no restrictions on touching, holding, sitting, or even lying on the supplied display, offering a unique experience that might be considered while making a purchasing decision. Positive feelings are indirectly

produced by the simulation of the ideal existence, which may have an impact on impulsive purchases.

IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan, which is categorized as a new furniture store close to the city of Bandung, is transformed into a fun entertainment spot by moments with friends and family that are restricted by governmental rules and the satisfaction of amusement demands. IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan is an all-in-one stop for an entire experience without having to move, thanks to its comprehensive facilities.

5. DISCUSSION

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, customer experiences were more centered on crowds and communally carried out activities. Events held in the form of exhibitions, concerts, and other decorations may cause people to wait in line before entering the event, which adds to the enjoyment of the experience. In the pre-Covid-19 pandemic, customers are looking for experiences that include the visual experience and the selfie economy.

Crowds in visiting exhibitions, galleries, and jostling also became an essential part of the customer experience, thus businesspeople tried to boost capacity and quantity as much as could to maximize revenues, especially in service-related industries. Businesses that sell products typically display them to customers as simulations or open-ended demonstrations.

4.3.2. Customer Experience during the Covid-19 Pandemic

During the Covid-19 epidemic, there was a regulatory shift in customer behavior from group interactions to individual ones. This included restrictions on visiting hours, time limits for eating meals in-person, and distance between people. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in several redefinitions of the customer experience, which may be regarded from three strategic perspectives: (1) personal experience, (2) social media, and (3) restrictions.

Customer experience, in terms of personal experience, is up to each individual customer's preferences. Customers now have more freedom to decide what kind of experience they want to have at IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan, whether they want to view the ideal residential display, indulge in delectable cuisine, or simply purchase ice cream snacks. Contrarily, laws that restrict crowds and crowds at a certain point make the experience more particular in light of the preferences of the customers themselves.

Additionally, social media has a significant impact on how customers experience the Covid-19 pandemic. Kotler, Kertajaya, and Setiawan (2021) claim that because of the prolonged use of social media, information and motivation for action are generated there. This is evident from the amount of visits made by customers to IKEA Kota Baru

Parahyangan as a result of social media. When researchers observed customers, some of them even asked personnel who worked in famous warehouse locations directly rather than requesting things that were in stock. The popularity of a location inspires tourists to travel to new locations.

Limitations are one of the new adaptations given in enjoying the customer experience, where there are various limits given in accordance with applicable health regulations and protocols in Indonesia, ranging from distance restrictions, time restrictions, restrictions on the number of people, restrictions on the places, restrictions on the senses, to various limitations. It is important to find innovative ways to work around this restriction so that it does not detract from the experience for customers rather than enhancing it.

The health component of the customer experience during the Covid-19 pandemic is more important, but on the other hand, customers should have the opportunity to enjoy the situation anyway they choose. During the Covid-19 epidemic, personalization of experience is something that needs to be taken into account. Additionally, the experience offered fits customers' emotional needs as well as the company's objective of increasing sales.

In order for customers to still enjoy the experience, it is important to pay attention to the five indicators of the customer experience. This can be achieved through a hybrid experience, which aims to bring together real-world and digital elements of the visitor's journey simultaneously. Making a good first impression, both offline and online, will give customers an unforgettable shopping experience and encourage word-of-mouth advertising from local customers.

The dissemination of information and messages on social media is necessary because information about rules relating to the application of visiting conditions that are too strict will also make customers psychologically feel lazy to enjoy the experience because it is not worth the sacrifices they have to make to experience the IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan. altered to prevent reluctance in the lead-up to the visit. In accordance with the crowds and circumstances at IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan, this health protocol should be applied situationally with extra staff moving about.

6. CONCLUSION

Customer experience was redefined in a number of ways before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, including personal experience, social media, and restrictions. Customer experiences have been redefined in terms of how they are delivered, but the experiences' contents have not changed between the time before and after the pandemic.

Personal experience, social media, and resource constraints are three strategic factors that affect the customer experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Personal experience demonstrates that visitors are free to select the plot of their experience. Social media is crucial in identifying experiences as a component of a community that shares them. The final constraint is to take into account the flexibility of the space allowing visitors to enjoy the event.

In order for customers to have a memorable overall experience, the flow from beginning to end must be carefully considered when redefining the customer experience. This can be enhanced in a number of ways, starting with the accessibility of auxiliary amenities including parking spaces, lines, hand washing stations, and hand sanitizers. Additionally, given how hard it is to find police who can help customers during the shopping process, the quantity of on-site workers needed for both delivering information about the goods and services supplied and monitoring health protocols needs to be raised.

It is important to take into account how interested the general public is in visiting IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan before developing a waiting system or scheduling visits to avoid creating a backlog of visitors. In order to avoid alarming guests who want to touch the equipment, props, trolleys, and other items in the IKEA Kota Baru Parahyangan showroom, it is also critical to routinely clean the space. Due to their high vulnerability and potential for droplet-based Covid-19 viral transmission, restaurants and cafeterias' air ventilation needs to be taken into account as well.

When creating games, activities, or stories that involve customers, whether using technology or conventional methods, in order to add value for customers—whether through giveaways, frank reviews, or the use of VR technology—customers may also try to explore limitations as elements of the experience itself. In terms of user experience and user interface of various digital tools, further research might emphasize the relevance of digital customer experience in the purchasing decision process. Research can also talk about hybrid experiences and how they affect the total customer experience, a phase that calls for a lot of concentration and consideration of both offline and online encounters, especially for business entities.

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