

Customer Experience in the In-store Customer Journey: Developing a Conceptual Model Based on the Grounded Theory

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Abstract

This research was conducted to identify the qualitative model of in-store customer experience. This study was performed using the grounded theory method and using quasi-structured and in-depth interviews with specialists and experts, the results of the interviews were categorized and formulated in a qualitative model after primary and secondary coding. The results of this research showed that the factors of product price and product quality are involved as causal conditions, advertising, location and time and social contexts as contextual conditions, store architecture and design, store cleanliness, human resources and store facilities as intervening conditions, supply chain and customer follow-up are involved as strategies to increase the quality of customer experience in chain stores. Based on the findings of this research, it can be stated that if the customer experience is improved, the result will be an increase in profits (due to an increase in the return rate of customers and an increase in their loyalty).

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Introduction

Today, attention to customer experience in companies is increasing day by day. Surveys and studies on the role of marketing in companies indicate increasing attention to customer experience management, and in recent years, the main focus of the marketing department of companies has been directed toward customer experience management (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017). Customer experience is one of the most fundamental topics that have attracted the attention of marketing experts for a long time. Abbott (1955) and Alderson (1957) emphasize this concept so much that from their point of view, what people really desire and want

are not products, but satisfactory experiences from the shopping process (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). In other words, it can be stated that creating happy minutes and seconds for customers and creating a positive mood for them can lead to the improvement of customer experience, and from this, the income of the organization will be increased, current customers will be retained and their return rate will be increased (Joshi, 2014).

Customer experience management refers to the processes that companies use to monitor, track, and evaluate all customer interactions with the company before, during, and after using the service/product (i.e., during the customer journey) (Watkinson, 2020). Customer experience management focuses on creating mental and physical happiness for customers, and it does this by providing valuable offers for customers which can be provided at the touch points between the organization and customers (Joshi, 2014). Despite the undeniable importance of customer experience and the need for marketing to focus on it, research on customer experience is scattered and there is relatively little information about this phenomenon (McColl-Kennedy, Gustafsson, Jaakkola, Klaus, Radnor, Perks & Friman, 2015). Also, the texts that refer to the concept of customer experience management are scattered in the fields of customer experience and other marketing management concepts, and there is no proper compilation of the literature in this field (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehn, 2017). Customer experience management is actually an answer to the question of how a company can design and deliver a customer experience that leads to a competitive advantage (Smith and Cova, 2003). A quality experience for customers is realized when a company focuses on customer perceptions, feelings and thoughts. In other words, customer experience refers to creating customer involvement in logical, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects with the company (Johnston and Kong, 2011). The goal of customer experience management is to create an uplifting feeling for customers, and this happens by providing an outstanding offer to customers. As a result of this proposal, customers start a permanent emotional relationship that is profitable for the company (Haghighi Bardineh, Haghighi Bardineh and Lotfizadeh, 2018). In other words, the customer experience is usually considered as a comprehensive and general nature that includes the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to any direct or indirect contact with the service provider, brand or product at several touch points expressed throughout the customer journey (McCool-Kennedy et al., 2015).

It should be stated that the customer experience includes all aspects of a company's offer, which includes the quality of importance to the customer in the first place, then advertising, packaging, product and service features, ease of use and reliability of the product, and this response of customers in an intrinsic and subjective form refers to any direct or indirect contact with a company (Meyer and Schwager, 2007).

Various dimensions of customer experience have been described in different ways in different researches and sources. Table 1 presents the critical dimensions mentioned in customer experience.

Table 1. Dimensions of customer experience in research literature

Authors	Publication year	Dimensions identified in customer experience
Schmitt	1999	Sensory, emotional, cognitive, physical and identity-social
McCarthy & Wright	2004	Sensory, emotional, hybrid and spatio-temporal
Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros & Schlesinger	2009	Cognitive, emotional, emotional, social and physical
Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello	2009	Mental and internal responses (feelings, emotions and cognition) and consumer behavioral responses
Grewal, Levy, and Kumar	2009	Price experience, advertising experience
De Keyser, Lemon, Klaus, Keiningham	2015	Cognitive, emotional, physical, sensory, spiritual and social
McCall Kennedy et al	2017	cognitive, emotional, social and physical

The topic of customer experience is not new, the roots of customer experience can be followed in the 1960s, the period that the early theories of marketing and consumer behavior, particularly in the work of Philip Kotler (1967) and John Howard and Jagdish Sheth (1969) were studied and the results were published. In the 70s, the topic of customer satisfaction and loyalty, in the 1980s, the issues of service quality, in the 90s, relationship marketing, in the 2000s, customer relationship management, in the next decade, topics related to the field of customer orientation and customer focus, and in the 2010s, the topic of interaction with the customer was the path that finally led to the topic of customer experience, and in other words, the intellectual center of this idea can be found in the course of developments mentioned in the marketing literature. (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) present the theoretical foundations of the development of the concept of customer involvement in Table 2-2.

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Time period	Subject	Articles	Participating in the customer experience
The 1960s to 1970s	Customer buying behavior: process models	Lavidge and Steiner (1961) Howard and Sheth (1969)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes shopping route • Extensive and experiential focus • Conceptual link models • Customer experience and customer decision-making are considered as a process
The 1970s	Customer satisfaction and loyalty	Oliver (1980), Zeithaml (1988), Bolton and Drew (1991), Gupta and Zeitham (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying key metrics to begin evaluating the overall customer experience • Empirical linkage models to identify key drivers • Measuring and evaluating customer perceptions and attitudes about an experience
The 1980s	The quality of service	Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), Bitner (1990, 1992), Rust and Chung (2006), Bitner, Ostrom, and Morgan (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atmosphere and environment included • Initial mapping of the journey through observations • Link marketing and implementation steps – focus on quality • Identify context and specific elements of customer experience
The 1990s	Affiliate marketing	Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987), Morgan and Hunt (1994), Berry (1995)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion to business-to-business (B2B) fields. • Key attitudinal drivers have been identified • Expanding the range of customer responses that are considered effective in the customer experience
2000	customer relation management	Reinartz and Kumar (2000), Verhoef (2003), Bolton, Lemon, and Verhoef (2004), Reinartz, Krafft, and Hoyer (2004), Rust, Lemon, and Zeithaml (2004),	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable assessment of return on investment • Identify key touch points and drivers • Data driven • Multichannel aspects are included • Determine how specific elements of the customer experience affect each other and business results

		Payne and Frow (2005), Kumar and Reinartz (2006), Neslin et al. (2006), Kumar and Shah (2009)	
2000-2010	Customer orientation and focus on the customer	Sheth, Sisodia, and Sharma (2000), Gulati and Oldroyd (2005), Shah et al. (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer perspective across the organization • Embed the customer and customer data deeper into the organization • Focus on redesigning the customer experience from the customer's perspective
2010s the	Customer management	Libai et al. (2010), Van Doorn et al. (2010), Brodie et al. (2011), Kumar, Peterson, and Leone (2010), Kumar et al. (2013), Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying the value of non-purchasing interactions • It includes positive and negative attitudes, feelings and behaviors • A conceptual platform to unify social media • Clearly recognize the customer's role in the experience

Table 2. Historical roots of customer experience

It should be noted that the customer journey is one of the main layers on which the customer experience is formed, and in other words, it should be determined what journey a customer goes through in an organization or company to buy a service or product (Barghi, 2015). Customer experience can be considered as a customer's journey with a company over time throughout the purchase cycle at multiple touch points. In other words, the entire customer experience can be conceptualized as a dynamic process that runs before the purchase (including search) until the purchase and after the purchase, and it is a repetitive and dynamic process. This process includes past experiences (including previous purchases) as well as external factors. At each stage, customers experience touch points (Lemon & Lehoff, 2016). In fact, the starting point of the customer's journey is not the time of his contact with the brand, and all his previous experiences, the opinions of advertisements and what he has heard about the brand are considered to be factors that make up the customer's experience and are effective in creating and shaping it (Barghi, 2015).

With these explanations, it is clear that the customer journey should be identified first, to improve the customer experience afterwards. Customer journey map is a visual representation to

understand and show customer touch points with the company. Touch points include both verbal and visual events and non-verbal and physical events, such as product use. In fact, the customer journey is the perception of all the signs of a brand by customers (Rudkowski, Heney, Yu, Sedlezky, and Gunn, 2020). Two types of customer experience can be introduced: the experience that the brand wants to create in the customer and the experience that customers like to have. A clear line can be drawn between the existing and ideal state in the customer journey. The distance between the ideal experience of customers and their actual experience shows in which sector brands should take operational measures to improve customer experience (Barghi, 2015).

Consumers' needs still direct their purchasing decisions. Shoppers make most of the consumption decisions, but newer technologies (such as the Internet of things, computer gadgets, and robots), newer business models (such as subscription models), and predictive analytics based on macro data show that the buying process is on the verge of a big leap and changes in influencing factors on the purchase by consumers (Grewal, Levy and Kumar, 2009). It should be noted that the experience of customers in any industry and service can be different from other industries and services and is influenced by different factors. The retail landscape (which is the focus of this research) is rapidly evolving. Today, retailers have realized that a better understanding of customers can increase customer satisfaction and their retail performance (Roy, Balaji, Sadeque, Nguyen & Melewar, 2017). According to this issue, we should take a closer look at the experience of customers in retail stores, which is the subject of this research. Verhoef et al. (2009) determined the factors that shape the customer experience by separating the factors under the control and out of the control of the company which forms the experience of customers. Accordingly, several factors, such as social environment, service interface, retail space, situational factors and the like shape the customer experience. It should be noted that the model proposed by Verhoef et al. is based on the experience of customers in the environment of retailers, and this model can be seen in the figure below.

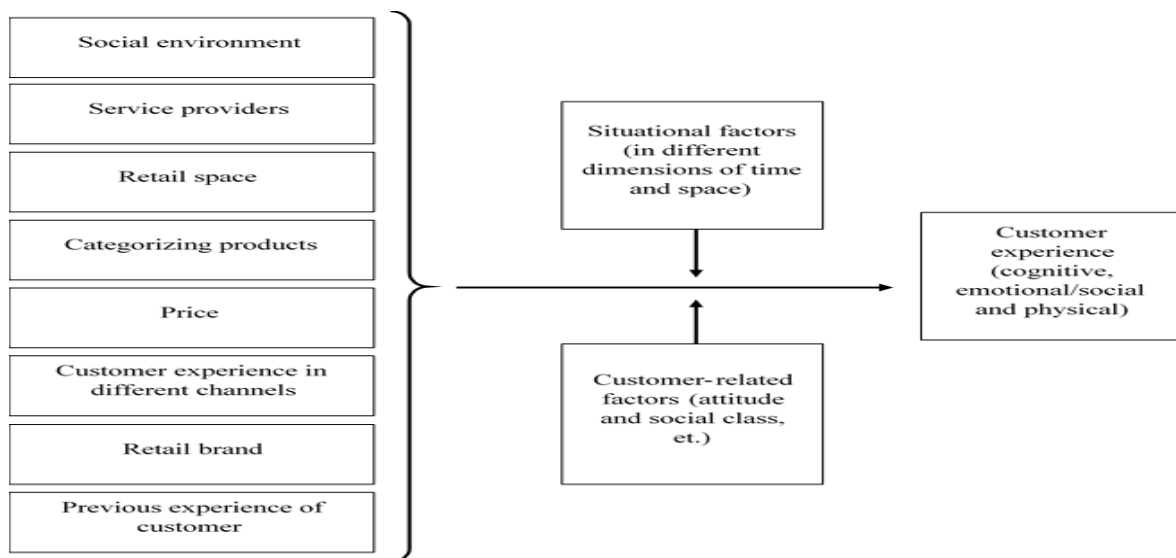


Figure 1. Customer experience model in retail stores based on the studies of Verhoef et al. (2009)

Grewal, Levy and Kumar (2009) in their research stated that the survival of retail sales is in the customer experience group. They provide a model. Based on the aforementioned research, customer experience management represents a business strategy designed to manage customer experience. It is a strategy that results in a win-win value exchange between the retailer and its customers. In this article, the role of macro factors in the retail environment and how they shape customer experience and behaviors are discussed. The model presented is as follows.

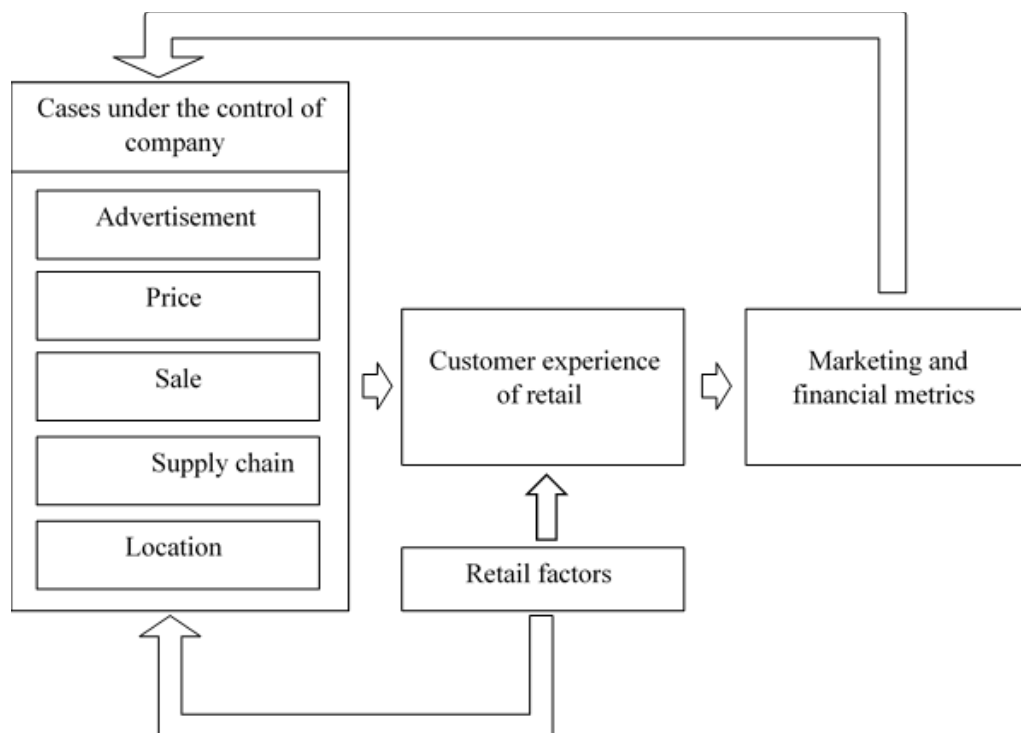


Figure 2. Customer experience model in retail stores based on studies by Grewal, Levy and Kumar (2009).

When discussing the customer experience in retail, we should acknowledge the fact that in today's multichannel environment, customer experiences in one channel (e.g., a store) may be influenced by experiences in other channels (e.g., the Internet) (Konus, Vanhorf et al. Neslin, 2008). We also consider the potential interaction between the retail brand and the customer experience provided. Customer experience is created not only by factors that the service provider can control (such as: personnel, space, collection, price) but also by factors that are beyond their control, such as the influence of other customers or devices, such as smartphones that customers chose to use in different situations (McCool Kennedy et al., 2015).

Despite acknowledging that customer experience emerges throughout the customer journey process, survey research has moved toward a static or momentary perspective over time. This process creates problems because it is based on respondents' memory of a process and may not always be an accurate representation of the actual event (McCool-Kennedy et al., 2015). In fact, it can be stated that before an organization can implement an action to improve the experience of its customers, it should measure the current experience of its customers and then by making changes and providing arrangements in different parts of the organization and the way of providing services and products, provide strategies to improve customer experience. For this, companies and organizations should be able to recognize how to take advantage of each customer touch point during their journey and employ these touch points to create a positive experience (Mousavi Kafraj, 2015). Based on what has been said, it is necessary to identify a model of effective and influential factors of customer experience, so that based on that, the touch points of customers can be identified during their journey in chain stores, and strategies for this issue can be identified and introduced. Based on this, the following questions were raised in this research:

The main research question: What is the quality model of customer experience in chain stores?

Sub questions:

- What are the causal conditions in customer experience in chain stores?
- What are the background conditions in customer experience in chain stores?
- What are the interfering conditions in customer experience in chain stores?
- What are the strategies for increasing the quality of customer experience in chain stores?
- What are the consequences of improving customer experience in chain stores?

Methods

This research is an applied type and has used the grounded theory method to formulate a model in the subject of the research. In this research, qualitative method has been used to identify the

factors affecting the quality of customer experience during their journey in chain stores. The main purpose of collecting qualitative data is to explore concepts, categories and the relationship between them according to the reaction of all participants towards the phenomenon under study. For this purpose, in the qualitative part of the research, by using in-depth qualitative interviews and by using stratified purposeful sampling method (Gal et al., 2014), the participants were selected from among the target population and were interviewed in-depth in the form of individual interviews.

In the research, the concept of society refers to all people who are subject to generalization (Delavar, 2001). According to the scope of the studied population, to select cases that show the range of changes of the researched phenomenon from various dimensions, stratified purposeful sampling (Gal et al., 2013) was used in the qualitative stage. Usually, in purposeful sampling, the considered selection of the samples that will participate in the research is done in such a way that the researcher can get a complete knowledge of the subject from the theoretical point of view. This sampling method is done according to the subject of the research and is based on the researcher's neural understanding and previous experience of the study population.

It was stated that in qualitative research methods, sampling is purposeful and the sample size is a function of theoretical saturation. In other words, sampling in the qualitative section and conducting interviews continue until saturation is reached (Strauss and Corbin, 2016). The basis for selecting people in this section is their deep knowledge and understanding of the subject under study. Therefore, a number of key people in different groups formed the sample, and as a result, the selection of participants in this part of the research was purposeful.

According to the qualitative approach in this research, open questions were designed in the form of a standard individual interview with a number of members of the target community. Of course, to avoid bias, the interview questions were determined in advance. After designing the interview questions, various hidden aspects of the research topic were explored from the perspective of these participants. The qualitative research data were analyzed through the coding process. Coding represents an operation in which data is broken down, conceptualized, and then linked together again in new ways. The purpose of data analysis from interviews is a basis for designing questionnaire items. To analyze the research data, live and value coding methods (Saldaniya, 2016) were used to unify the horizons, then the codes were interwoven with each other and described, finally the codes were clustered based on conceptual affinity and each of the clusters was described. In the second and third stages, the umbrella coding technique (Saldaniya, 2016) was used.

Results

In-depth interviews were conducted with experts in this field to identify the effective factors on customer experience in chain stores as mentioned. These interviews were implemented and

carefully reviewed. After implementing and writing the interviews, the coded content was coded by three independent coders. Live coding and value coding methods have been used for coding in this section.

The interviewed content and its initial coding was the result of the agreement of at least two coders. If three coders expressed three different opinions during the coding process, they were asked to review the codes again. In case of disagreement, the coders would talk to each other and finally their joint final opinion was used. After the end of the initial coding, the identified codes (without considering duplicates) were placed next to each other in terms of similarity. These primary codes were given a new code based on the core of the content that linked them, which is called secondary coding.

After the completion of the secondary coding stage, categories were formed based on the semantic and conceptual similarity between the secondary codes. These categories are the main effective topics in the field of customer experience in the journey they have in a chain retail store. The current categories are the result of summarizing the secondary codes. This stage of coding is implemented with umbrella coding, and the purpose of this type of coding is to choose a code that can cover all related concepts and categorize them based on common content.

Table 3. Categorization and identification of the counted concepts

Secondary coding	Category
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advertising and promotion - Branding 	Advertisement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attitude to the industry - cultural issues - Social issues - political issues 	Social contexts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Store location - Access to the car park - Store hours 	Location and time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exterior architecture - Suitability of shelves - Arrangement of goods 	Store architecture and design
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Store cleanliness 	Store cleanliness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supply chain management - Customer waiting time 	Supply Chain

management - Brand and product diversity	
- Appearance of personnel - Behavioral status of employees - Employee performance	Human power
	Training and selection of employees
- Convenient store facilities - Ability to compare products and prices - Information security - Guidance information	Store facilities
- Price of products - Discounts	Price of product
- Quality of products	Quality of products
- Customer follow-up and after-sales service	Customer follow-up
- Customer loyalty - Increase in profit	Increase in profit

Description of identified categories

Based on the findings of the qualitative part of the research and their categorization, the following concepts have been identified during the interviews, which can be described as follows:

Advertisements: Advertisement is one of the most basic touch points that customers have with a chain retail store. This factor is considered as a marketing mix. Advertisements can create a mindset for potential customers creating before meeting the physical space of chain stores and creates a part of expectations and attitudes and mental issues, such as these for them. The set of promotional processes that may occur in different media spaces, from physical to digital, is considered the starting point of the customer's journey.

Social contexts: Attitudes toward chain stores are not only influenced by advertisements, but also by many other factors. This factor is made up of the concepts of attitude toward the industry, cultural issues, social issues and political issues. For example, if a society considers the creation of chain stores as the cause of the collapse of local businesses and therefore opposes the

establishment of such centers, it is obvious that the experiences of customers will face problem under this factor. In other words, people's perception of this trip is influenced by social, political and cultural pressures.

Location: The location of a store that forms part of the customer journey is saturated with factors, such as store location, access to car parking and store hours. These items mean the ease of access to the store. The proximity of the store location to the main buyers or the accessibility of the desired location from the point of view of urban transportation or the presence of a parking space for customers who prefer to travel by private car are among the things that can affect the customer's journey. To physically move to the store, they change their journey from the mental state that arose from advertisements to the objective state, that is, the movement of physics. Any problems in this journey, such as excessive distance, lack of parking space or suitable vehicle for access, will lead to the fact that the customer experience will be affected by these factors and its quality will be affected as a dependent variable.

Architecture and design of the store: The physical space of the store and its architecture and design is an effective factor in the customer experience. This factor consists of two exterior and interior aspects and is saturated with factors, such as external architecture, suitability of shelves and arrangement of goods. The exterior architecture includes the facade and the materials used in it to the lighting, and the interior architecture refers to the arrangement of the shelves and its interior materials. Aisle distances and shelf height, as well as arranging products in a way that can create easy access for customers, are among the main things that affect the customer's journey. Customer experience during a store visit is the most obvious physical touch point between the customer and the brand, and it can lead to a positive or negative state in the mentality and experience of customers.

Cleanliness of the store: The cleanliness of the store, which refers to both the external and internal environment of the store, is an issue affecting the customer experience. A clean and pollution-free environment, especially in chain stores that supply food, is an issue that will be highly considered by customers and will affect the experience of customers during their journey.

Supply chain: the presence of products that customers need, the variety of products and brands that give customers freedom of choice and more ability to make decisions is something that can add to the attractiveness of customers' journey and provide them with a richer experience. Customers go to chain stores so that they can have a complete basket of their needs and if they cannot fill their basket with preferred brands or find part of the products they need, or wait longer than expected in the supply line, it leads to displeasure and as a result an unpleasant experience is obtained for him.

Human power: Like any service company, human power, which is considered as part of the marketing mix, plays a fundamental and effective role in the customer experience. Human

resources are the link between the store and the customer and it is the one who gives a human effect to the store, the lack of training of the human resources and the lack of necessary abilities in professional and communication dimensions can create an unpleasant experience for customers.

Store facilities: One of the most basic issues that can affect the journey of customers in chain stores is the store facilities. The store's facilities are saturated with factors including dedicated parking and mother and child room, the possibility of comparing products and prices, and the security of information and guide information and the like. These facilities create a unique experience for customers which increase the feeling of satisfaction in people.

Product price: Obviously, product price is not determined by stores, but one of the expectations of customers from chain stores is a lower price than the level of local stores. This need of customers is usually provided more than anything by various discounts offered by chain stores. In other words, one part of the customer journey is influenced by the customer experience and is influenced by the price, which is one of the basic elements of the marketing mix.

Quality of products: Having a brand that sells products is different from the experience of shopping at local stores. Because the chain store has an independent identity and special branding, it also creates a different expectation for customers, and that expectation is a guarantee of the quality of the products they buy. In other words, customers prefer chain stores to local stores so that they can have peace of mind about the brand's reputation. Customer follow-up: Customers should not be abandoned after purchase. The customer journey does not end with payment. Chain stores should follow up with their customers and be open to their satisfaction and complaints and react appropriately. This factor will not only make the customer's journey more pleasant for him, but also increase the return rate of customers.

Increase in profit: improving customer experience leads to increased customer satisfaction. Increasing customer satisfaction is a matter that increases the life of customers and increases the return rate of customers. The return of customers leads to an increase in profitability for the company and finally, despite the stability of the flow of incoming customers, it will lead to the stability of the brand.

In this research, a qualitative model was developed based on the existing findings, which are categorized into categories with meaning. This qualitative model shows the relationships between different categories that are placed next to each other and shows a visual view of influence and effectiveness relationships. In table 4, you can see the categories that are placed next to each other. In fact, the factors are the conditions that display the paradigm of the results of the qualitative concepts during the interviews. These factors include causal conditions, intervening conditions, background conditions, strategies, consequences, and finally the main category or phenomenon.

Causal conditions refer to those events and concepts that affect phenomena. Causal or causative conditions are elements and factors that cause or contribute to the occurrence of a phenomenon. In addition to the causal conditions, there are intervening conditions that can change the causal conditions in some way, these conditions can increase or decrease the effect size of the causal conditions. Background conditions are a set of identical conditions that create a platform for the occurrence of a phenomenon at a specific time or place, and in other words, causal conditions occur in a context that is background conditions.

Strategies and consequences refer to two continuous conditions, strategies are conditions that focus on the disturbances created in the studied phenomenon and provide a strategy to solve the problems. The consequences are also the result of the occurrence of the phenomenon after solving the problems. In other words, the conditions of the consequences refer to the occurrence of the phenomenon after the implementation of the strategies. The main phenomenon is the core content of the research. Everything that is researched has a fundamental core that is represented as the main phenomenon in the conceptual model and all conditions are directly or indirectly related to it.

Table 4. Effective conditions in customer experience in chain stores

Factors	Categories
Background conditions	Social contexts
	Location
	Advertisements
Causal conditions	Product price
	Quality of products
Intervening conditions	Store architecture and design
	Store cleanliness
	Manpower
	Store facilities
Strategies	Follow up customers

	supply chain
	Training and selection of human resources
Outcomes	Increase in profit

The relationships between the identified variables can be displayed visually as follows.

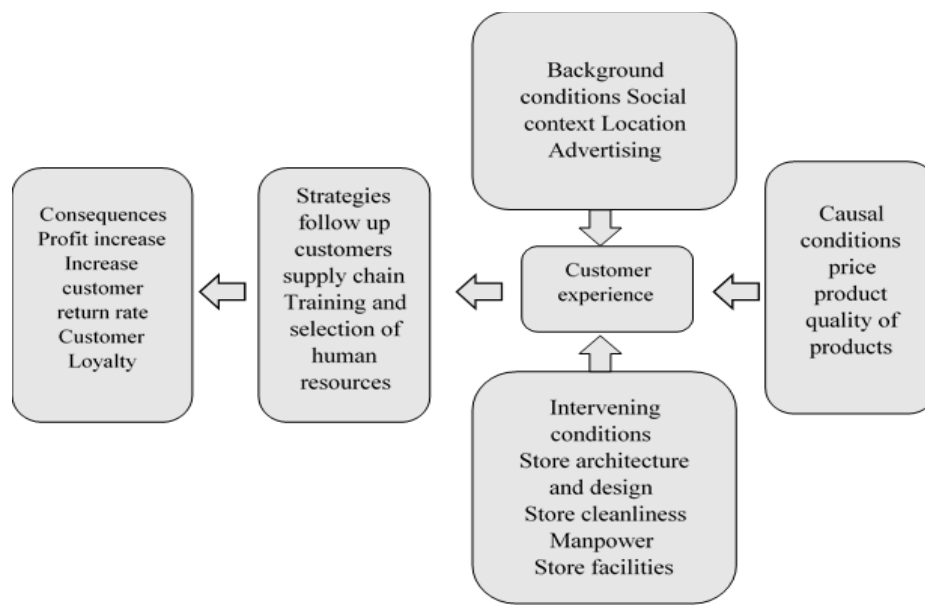


Figure 3. Qualitative model of customer experience in chain stores

Discussion and conclusion

In this research, qualitative method was used to identify the qualitative model of customer experience in chain stores. This method was performed using the grounded theory method and using quasi-structured and in-depth interviews with specialists and experts, the results of the interviews were categorized and formulated in a qualitative model after primary and secondary coding.

The results of this research showed that the factors of product price and product quality as causal conditions, advertisement, location and time and social contexts as contextual conditions, store architecture and design, store cleanliness, human resources and store facilities as intervening conditions, supply chain and follow-up of customers are involved as strategies to increase the quality of customer experience in chain stores, and if the customer experience can be improved by focusing on these points, chain stores can expect an increase in profits as a result.

Based on these findings, chain stores and decision-makers in this field should provide attractive offers for customers by focusing on the needs of customers at the identified touch points, so that they can increase their satisfaction from their shopping experience and therefore increase profitability due to increasing the return rate of customers.

The limitation of this research was the focus on the experts' point of view, so it is suggested to examine this topic from the customers' point of view so that the ideal journey of the customers can also be identified. Also, considering the focus of this research on retail chain stores, which mainly supply perishable goods, it should be investigated how the quality model will be in chain stores that supply other types of goods.

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