International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
Impact Factor 2025: 7.089

Decoding Communication Touchpoints in the Customer Decision Journey

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Abstract: ***Eat Around the Corner is a cafe-restaurant located at Bandra West in Mumbai, where the whole process of eating itself becomes a space for encountering cues during decision-making process. In this study, the process of encountering visual, written, interpersonal and spatial cues leading up to a guest's departure is analyzed. The focus of this study is the food displays, menus, prices, restaurant staff, companions, seating and the physical space, along with the relationship between those aspects and guests' decisions made through the whole process. The guest's journey through the cafe-restaurant is analyzed as a whole including before-visit information, entering the restaurant, food choice, ordering, paying, seating, eating, exploring and leaving the place. Instead of considering food choice as an isolated decision, it is understood within the whole journey of guests through the cafe-restaurant. The results show that food-related information is obtained in a combination of different sources where visual and written information are accompanied by social and spatial cues. The physical environment adds another layer by providing direction and defining when and where the guests encounter information. Overall, the study offers an overview of the restaurant experience as a process of communication, which involves the interconnected touchpoints in communication and design to support decision-making in the eating environment.***

Keyword: Customer Journey; Food Choice; Communication Touchpoints; Servicescape; Decision-Making; Restaurant Experience

1. Introduction

The process of dining at a restaurant goes beyond interactions at the ordering point. Information reaches the customers before even entering the restaurant while navigating the environment, choosing food items, during the payment stage, while selecting seating, and after the meal itself. This means that the restaurant becomes a medium where communication takes place via objects, people, space organization, and customer knowledge. This research project focuses on Eat Around the Corner, a café-restaurant located in the area of Bandra West, Mumbai. In the Discovery stage of the project, the restaurant was characterized by spaciousness and good design. The visibility of food items, clean and neat presentation of the items, and a calm atmosphere were elements of the experience. The layout of the restaurant is based on a sequence: entrance -> food items display -> ordering counter -> seating. There are also outdoor spaces which offer customers more opportunities for seating.

Communication takes place even before the customer enters the premises. Things such as Google, Zomato, Swiggy, word of mouth, friends, family, and the restaurant's reputation provide information that sets expectations for the customer prior to entering. Inside communication takes place through food displays, menu, pricing, signages, interaction with staff, conversations between individuals at the same table. In the original Discover research, a few decision-making points were identified. Whether to enter or not, what to order, how much to pay, where to sit, whether to look around, and when to go. The Decode process takes into account these concepts. Examining the conversations and communications surrounding these decisions. The primary objective of the research is to capture how the customers interact with the various communication touchpoints during food related decision making process at Eat Around the corner.

Eat Around is perceived by the research as an environment that delivers messages through means such as visuals, reading, conversations, and physical location of individuals. Decision making is distributed across these experiences.

2. Literature Review

There has been an increasing tendency in the customer experience studies which considers the process of consumption as consisting of stages rather than a single phase. According to Lemon & Verhoef, customer experience occurs at the points of interaction between a client and the company and is realized with the help of various communication channels. This approach is crucial for Eat Around as the experience at the restaurant takes place prior to entering it and lasts while ordering, eating, and after finishing eating. The servicescape theory allows considering the impact of the physical environment where the service takes place on the customers. In accordance with the servicescape theory by Bitner, the physical environment of service delivery affects customers' and staff's behavior. Therefore, the environment is not just the background but an integral component of the experience and interactions.

This approach is crucial for Eat Around as customers visit a series of locations: entering first, then looking at the food, then ordering at the counter and sitting. So the choices people make are part of the place they are in not separate from it. Belk's research about the situations that influence people also shows how important it is to look at the surroundings when understanding what customers do. Peoples actions are easier to understand when we think about the situation they're in along, with the person making the decision.

Together these viewpoints support three ideas for this research: customer experience is based on the journey a person takes communication happens through many different

points of contact and the physical and social surroundings are part of how people behave when they consume something. The current study uses these ideas in a real restaurant setting. Of trying to find out the effect of each single point of contact it uses them as a way to look at how decisions, about food are connected to the bigger picture of the customers experience.

3. Research Methodology

Observation is used as the methodology of investigation as the focus of the study is not only on the nature of the restaurant itself but on its role as the environment for communication and decision-making. The environment was observed using the movement of customers, communication artifacts, activities, information resources and decision points. They included food displays, menu boards, prices, signs, communication with staff members, seating arrangement, outside areas, restrooms, feedback systems and outside sources of information (online reviews and friends' and relatives' opinions).

The observations were organized in terms of communication maps and patterns in order to identify the relationship between the elements of the restaurant and its environment. Customer journey was analyzed starting from pre-visit information and entrance and going up to food selection, ordering, payment, seating, dining, exploring, giving feedback and exiting the restaurant. Communication points were divided into four groups: visual and informational, human, spatial and response-based communication. Three main themes were identified: decision-making takes place in many different places during the experience; decisions are part of the actual trip; and decision-making about food is a social process, influenced by the interactions with companions and employees.

There is a clear difference between observation and interpretation in the study. For instance, if we see a person observing food displays, it means that there was visual observation; however, this does not mean that the display resulted in the purchase.

4. Discussion

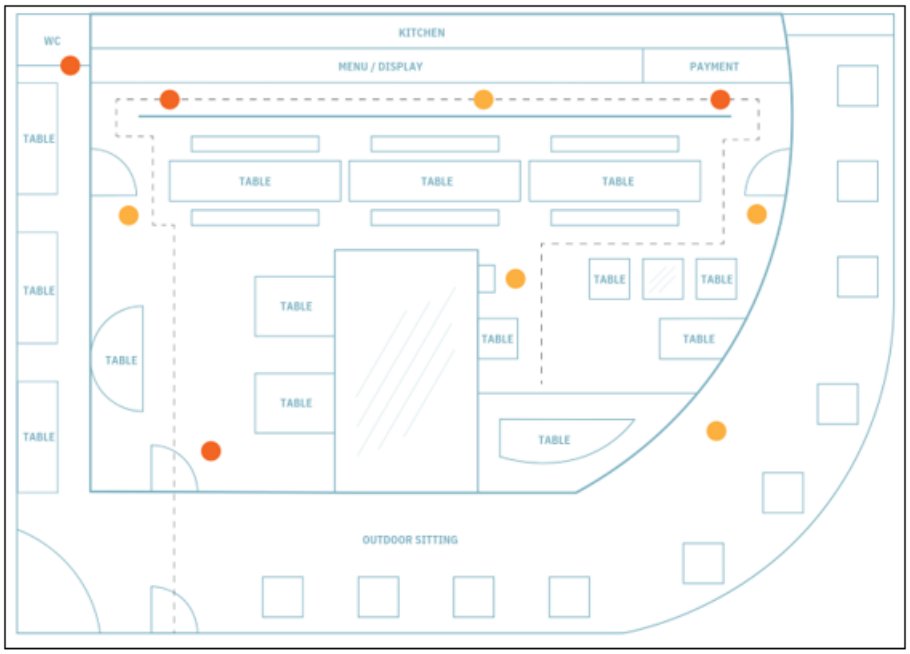
The decision-making process of Eat Around the Corner is not contained in one point or communication touchpoint. Rather, the customers experience varied kinds of information depending on their location in the restaurant, as the food display, menu, price, personnel, companions and surroundings play roles in decision-making.

Decision-making involves a number of communication touchpoints: Food decision starts prior to the customer reaching the ordering point. Food display gives visual information, menu gives names, descriptions, category and price. Personnel is involved in the process through questions, clarification and ordering. Where there are groups, companions can be involved in the process through discussion and comparison of options. Thus, the recorded sequence clearly shows that food choice is surrounded by several communication touchpoints.

That is, however, not to say that there is a direct causality relationship between a touchpoint and a certain choice. On the contrary, it means that different types of communication happen at different moments of the same choice process. Thus, visual, text-based and personal communication work simultaneously. It means that the menu is just one part of the broader food communication system. It implies an interesting possibility in terms of creating links between already existing touchpoints and not adding new communication opportunities. For instance, the link between the food itself and its information in the menu could be highlighted in such a way that it will allow consumers to switch from looking at the food to knowing its name, description and price.

The physical environment is involved in the way decisions are made as well: The process of moving throughout the restaurant involves quite a predictable path. In this case, people have to make decisions in the course of physically moving through the space. Food display is a very significant point in such a route, and seating is a decision made after the food order has been placed. As can be seen from the customer journey described above, the visit includes several smaller decisions rather than one single big purchase decision. People can first decide whether they want to enter the place, then choose their food, spend money on the order, choose the seat, go around, give feedback. The physical layout of the restaurant can thus be seen as part of the communication process. This is in accordance with the servicescape view which understands that the physical setting is an element of the service offering and not merely a backdrop. The positioning and visibility of information can affect what the customers come across and when they come across it.

In terms of designing a space, this means that the information should be located near the decision it aids. Information related to food should be located near the food decision point, while information related to seats should be available near the seats decision point. Feedback mechanisms should be located at the end of the journey. The communication process can therefore aid the existing movement of the customer.



Food choices may also serve as a form of social communication: Communication between customers and companions in regard to food choices and seating arrangements, as well as the communication between the customers and the restaurant staff in regard to ordering and paying for the services provided, is established as a part of the research. It implies that food choices are not only about the interaction between one customer and a menu. Other people may get involved into the information exchange process.

Social aspects of the customer's journey should be viewed in connection with the visual and spatial aspects. At once, the customer might come across the information about food choices via the food presentation or menu, conversation with companions or staff members, and surrounding environment. However, it remains unclear in how far the role of companions or even staff influences the decision making of the customer. Additional interviews or even questioning would be necessary to find out whether the discussion confirms an already existing decision or even influences it. The finding is thus only concerned with the fact that human interaction is a recurring element in the decision environment described above.

This raises the issue of designing the information exchange process. Since customers do not always make their decisions individually but sometimes as a group, information must be easily accessible and discussable.

Stage	User Action	Experience	Touchpoints	Observation
Arrival	Walks in from busy Bandra Lane	Immediate sense of calm & openness	Entrance architecture, AC	Strong contrast between exterior & interior creates a welcoming first impression
First Impression	Notices the food display	Colourful food immediately attracts attention against the neutral interiors	Buffet- style display, lighting	Food becomes the primary visual focus
Guided Exploration	Follows the designated pathway	Browses while walking without feeling rushed	Menu boards, signage, displayed dishes	Layout naturally supports browsing & gradual decision making
Ordering	Places order and pays	Quick, simple interaction with staff	Staff Cashier	Payment before dining removes the need for billing later
Dining Space Selection	Looks for a table	Scans indoors & outdoor seating before choosing	Seating Layout, mirrors, windows	Open visibility makes navigation & seat selection easy

Stage	User Action	Experience	Touchpoints	Observation
Waiting	Sits & waits for food	Relaxed atmosphere with music & sunlight	Ambient music, natural light, staff	Staff remain present but unobtrusive
Drinking	Eats and Socializes	Comfortable and Uniterurupted meat	Food, seating, ambiance	Dining becomes the longest & most relaxed stage of the journey
Exploration	Visits washroom or Outdoor seating	Continues experiencing the brand environment	Washroom mural, Outdoor Lounge	Even Secondary spaces maintain the same visual identity
Feedback	Completed paper feedback form	Personal, traditional interaction	Feedback card & pen	Reinforces tne restaurant's aid-school, custom-focused approach
Departure	Leaves through the Outdoor exit	Claim conclusion without payment-related inturruption	Outdoor Seating, exit	Users often explore the outdoor space before leaving

Communication and choice go beyond the first choice of the food: The customers will be able to explore the secondary space once the purchase has been made, communicate with the surroundings while dining and engage with the feedback systems before leaving. This expands the communication process beyond the point of sale. This is essential since it makes it clear that the communication process in the restaurant does not only involve assisting the customer to make an order but goes beyond this. The results, in total, imply that the design opportunity is to improve the connections of the current communication system. This research does not imply that the need to have more signage or more information. Rather, effective communication could be achieved through the enhancement of the connections among different sensory experiences of customers during their stay at the restaurant.

Design for social decision-making: Design the menu and food display in such a way that social decision-making is facilitated through provision of information that is easy to look at, compare and discuss. Use consistent dish references, prices, and other key information so that people can easily refer to the same dishes.

Design the transitions between decisions: Connect different stages in the customer's journey experience by offering the right information at a time when one decision triggers another decision. The examples include linking the choice of food to ordering, ordering to sitting, and eating to exploring or giving feedback.

Reduce the work of connecting information: Develop a consistent information system across the food display, the menu, and the ordering point. This will be achieved by using consistent dish names, references, prices, and other key information.

In that regard, the Decode phase shows that customer experience in Eat Around should be considered as a journey of communication where visual, verbal, interpersonal and environmental communication overlaps with decision making. The next phase of Sensemaking could then capitalize on that knowledge by exploring the touch points that customers consider significant, the instances where they make changes in their decisions, and the type of information that commits them to decision making.

5. Conclusion

Eat Around the Corner can be understood as a multi-touchpoint communication environment rather than simply a place where food is purchased. Customers encounter information before entering, while moving through the restaurant, during food selection, through interactions with staff and companions, while choosing a seat, and after eating. The research identifies three key understandings: decisions are distributed across multiple touchpoints, with food displays, menus, prices and interpersonal interactions forming the food-selection environment; choices are embedded within the physical journey and occur at different times and spaces; and food choices can be socially situated through information shared between customers, companions and staff. The research does not establish that any single touchpoint directly influences a decision, but rather shows that decisions take place within a broader communication system. These findings provide a foundation for further research into how customers perceive these touchpoints, which forms of information they consider important, and what causes them to change or commit to a decision.

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