

Empirical Research Paper

Client experience on projects

Rodney Turner*

School of Civil Engineering, University of Leeds, and Warwick Manufacturing Group, University of Warwick, UK



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ABSTRACT

We consider client experience on projects. The topic of customer experience is receiving a lot of interest in marketing. It is believed that vendors that manage customer experience achieve better results than those who do not. All the work to date has been done in retail. We consider the nature of client experience on projects. Nobody has previously researched client experience on projects, but several authors have written on issues relevant to the topic. We review that literature. We have interviewed five clients who have experience of interacting with contractors on projects. We report the results. We find that clients on projects have similar experiences to customers in retail. But on projects the client controls the interactions whereas in retail it is the vendor that controls the interactions. We suggest that on projects we should also consider contractor experience. Also on projects, maintaining interaction between the client and contractors leads to better performance.

1. Introduction

Customer experience is a topic generating interest in the marketing literature, (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). It has been suggested that vendors that manage customer experience achieve better results than those that do not, (Klaus, 2015). To date, all the work that has been done on customer experience has been done in retail. We suggest that projects are a different context worthy of study, and so we study client experience through the project life-cycle. A significant difference that emerges between retail and projects is that whereas in retail it is the vendor that controls the customer experience, on projects it is the client that manages the contact journey with the contractors. Both the client and contractors have experiences at the touchpoints through that contact journey. This paper investigates the client's experiences. In retail it is the customer's satisfaction and loyalty that is at risk if they have bad experiences. On projects both the client's and contractor's satisfaction and loyalty are at risk. The contractor's experiences are a topic for future research.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) address the importance of experience in the post-modernist world and suggest organizations can benefit from creating enduring customer experiences. The concept of customer experience can be traced back to Adam Smith (2012/1776) and John Maynard Keynes (2017/1936) and has received attention in the philosophy, psychology and sociology literature. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) define customer experience as:

a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial and social responses to a firm's offerings during a customer's entire purchase journey.

To date, work in customer experience has been in retail. Initially, researchers looked at B2C, looking at the experiences individuals when they purchase goods, (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). More recently, researchers have investigated B2B, suggesting businesses go through similar experiences. (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Kuppelweisser and Klaus, 2021). Howard and Sheth (1969) suggested that customers go through a three-phase journey as they purchase an item:

- Pre-purchase
- Purchase
- Post-purchase

In pre-purchase they recognise their need and search for options; in purchase they make a choice, order and pay money, and in post purchase they consume or use the item and may make service requests. At touchpoints through those three phases the purchaser makes contact with the vendor, and has cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial or social responses to the vendors behaviour and offerings. Those responses influence the customer's experience. In retail it is the supplier that controls the interactions. The customer seeks the interactions, but the supplier controls them.

In this paper we wish to extend this work to investigate customer

* EuroProjex, Wildwood Manor Close, East Horsley, Surrey, KT24 6SA, UK.

E-mail addresses: rodneytturner@europrojex.co.uk, r.j.turner1@leeds.ac.uk, john.r.turner@warwick.ac.uk.

experiences on projects. On projects, customers are usually called clients, so in the rest of this paper we refer to client experience on projects. The customer experience literature in the field of marketing is fairly new and based on our review of the literature nobody has published a paper in the project management journals which cites and builds on the customer experience literature in marketing. However, people have done research and written papers on topics relevant to client experience. We did a review of papers published in the three journals of project management back to 2015. The three journals are the International Journal of Project management, the Project Management Journal and the International Journal of Managing Projects in Business. This leads to our first research question:

RQ1 What has been written in the project management literature about topics relevant to client experience on projects?

On projects it is the client that manages the interaction with the contractors. This is different to retail, where the vendor manages the interaction. When a client has a project to be done, they invite contractors to bid, and have experiences in their interactions with the contractors through the project life-cycle. We wish to find what those experiences are. This leads to our second research question:

RQ2 How do project clients experience interaction with contractors at key touchpoints through the project contract life-cycle.

In the next section we consider what has been written in the project management literature about topics relevant to client experience on projects. We then describe the results of interviews we have done with client project managers or contract managers about their experiences interfacing with contractors through the project life-cycle. We summarise our conclusions in the final section.

2. Client experience on projects

In retail, the vendor controls the interaction with the customer at touchpoints through the purchase life-cycle, (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). It is the purchaser that seeks out and initiates the interaction, but it is the vendor that manages the interaction and so manages the customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial and social responses. To date the marketing literature has ignored the vendor's experience. The thinking is it is the customer's satisfaction and loyalty that is at risk, and so the vendors need to manage that. On projects it is again the client that seeks out the interaction, but it is the client that manages the interaction not the contractor. The satisfaction and loyalty of both the client and contractor is at risk, and so both need to be concerned about the experiences of the other, but it is the client that manages the actual interaction. In this paper we have explored the client experience through interviews, which will be described later.

We reviewed what has been written about client experience on projects in the three main project management journals over the past six years. Nobody cited the marketing literature on the topic, but several authors have written about relevant elements. Turner et al. (2019) come the closest. They are talking about the interaction between the client and contractor from the contractor's perspective, but when talking about project marketing they suggest how the contractor can influence the client experience. In the section that follows we relate the research that has been done to the marketing literature. Table 1 provides a summary.

2.1. The journey

We saw above, that in retail Howard and Sheth (1969) suggested a three-stage customer journey. For projects, Lecoeuvre and Deshayes (2006) and Turner et al. (2019) identified a four-stage cycle:

- Pre-project

Table 1

Authors writing about topics relevant to client experience on projects.

Paper	Focus	Topic covered	Touchpoints
Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2019)	Project marketing	Relationships	Repeated throughout the four stages: Pre-project, tender, delivery, post-project
Lecoeuvre and Deshayes (2006) Turner et al. (2019)	Project marketing	Relationships	Repeated throughout the four stages: Pre-project, tender, delivery, post-project
Turner and Müller (2004)	Communication between client and contractor	Reliability	Throughout the four stages
Turner et al. (2019)	Project marketing	Reliability	Repeated throughout the four stages: Pre-project, tender, delivery, post-project
Ning et al. (2019)	Ambivalence	Reliability	Throughout project delivery
Turner and Zolin (2012)	Project success	Offerings	At project completion In the months and years post project
Value Fuentes et al. (2019)	Creation of value networks in design	Value	Design during delivery
McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019)	Knowledge and competence of project team and client enables interaction	Resources	Throughout project delivery
Chih et al. (2019)	Knowledge and competence of project team and client enables interaction	Resources	Throughout project delivery
Diegmannel al. (2017)	Influence of product and process on customer satisfaction	Activities	Throughout project delivery
Basten et al. (2016)	Influence of agile practices on customer responsiveness	Activates	Throughout project delivery and completion
Recker et al. (2017)	Influence of agile practices on customer responsiveness	Activates	Throughout project delivery and completion
Havermans et al. (2015)	Influence of narratives on relationships	Context	Throughout project delivery
Lecoeuvre and Deshayes (2006) Turner et al. (2019)	Project marketing	Interactions	Repeated throughout the four stages: Pre-project, tender, delivery, post-project
Söderlund (2012) Addyman (2020)	Two components of collaboration: cooperation and coordination	Interaction	
Yu (2017)	Customer participation	Customer role	Throughout project delivery
Floris. and Cuganesan (2019)	Engagement with stakeholders	Cognitive responses	Project handover
Derakhshan et al. (2019)	Legitimacy	Cognitive responses	
Williams et al. (2015)	Client satisfaction and relationship quality	Happiness (joy)	Project handover
Invernizzi et al. (2018)	Information flows	Frustration (sadness)	Transfer of information
Turner and Müller (2004)	Communication between client and contractor	Discomfort (fear)	Written and verbal communication

- Tendering
- Project delivery
- Post-project

2.2. Dimensions

Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2020) investigated dimensions of customer experience. Building on a model, called EXQ, to measure customer

experience, (Klaus and Aaklan, 2013; Klaus, 2015), they identified two dimensions of customer experience in B2C and three dimensions in B2B. B2B is relevant in projects. The three dimensions are:

- Relationships
- Reliability
- Offering

Relationships: Turner et al. (2019) identify the importance of relationships between the client and contractors on projects. Lecoeuvre and Deshayes (2006) identified six interactions between clients and contractors, which they called: relationships; communication; trust; collaboration; training; and going-with. Turner et al. (2019) called the interaction between client and contractor collaboration and said it had four dimensions: relationships; communication; trust; and going-with. The included training in going with.

Reliability: Turner and Müller (2004) and Turner et al. (2019) suggest that it is important that the customer should trust the supplier's competence and ethics. Ning et al. (2019) investigate how ambivalence can cause the client to trust the contractor in some areas and distrust them in other areas at the same time.

Offering: Turner and Zolin (2012) identify three levels of offerings on project:

- The project output: the new asset that is delivered at the end of the project
- The project outcome: the asset must work to provide the client with new competencies which when operated deliver value. Whether this is achieved is judged in the months after project completion
- The project goals: with time the client will be able to achieve higher order goals delivering performance improvement. Whether this is achieved is judged in the years after completion

Turner & Zolin suggest during the project, project managers often take decisions to finish the project to time, cost and quality. However, they suggest it is more important that the project managers take decisions to deliver value, that is the output performs as desired, the outcome is achieved in the months following project completion, and the goals are achieved in the years following project completion. No value is delivered until the outcome is achieved, (Lusch et al., 2007), and achieving it increases perceived reliability and strengthens relationships.

2.3. Value creation

Value in use is often mentioned as a key part of customer experience, with the service dominant school of marketing often being quoted, (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Turner et al. (2019) following Turner and Zolin (2012), make the point that no value is achieved until the project output works and the outcome is achieved. (Lusch et al., 2007). Fuentes et al. (2019) use the service dominant school of marketing to investigate the creation of value networks to create value from the client's perspective in the design stage of the project. They suggest to involve the client in the design stage so that the project on completion will deliver value.

McCull-Kennedy et al. (2019) develop a conceptual model showing how five value creation elements can lead to cognitive or emotional responses at touchpoints during customer-vendor interaction. The five value creation elements are: resources; activities; context; interactions; and customer role.

Resources: Chih et al. (2019) look at how the knowledge and competence of both project professionals and the client enables interaction between them.

Activities: Diegmannel al (2017) and Basten et al. (2016) show that product and process influence customer expectations on projects. Recker et al. (2017) look at how agile practices influence customer

responsiveness by improving team efficiency and effectiveness.

Context: Havermans et al. (2015) look at how narratives can influence relationships. They look at the importance of different groups, the influence of outsiders and the management of conflicting perspectives.

Interactions: Turner et al. (2019) identified four components of collaboration between clients and contractors. Söderlund (2012) and Addyman (2020) identify two components of collaboration: coordination and cooperation. Cooperation is related to governance, and is about setting common goals, (Turner and Müller, 2004), and is not in the four components suggested by Turner et al. (2019). Coordination is about relationships, synchronizing activities and communicating to jointly manage risk, and is covered by the four components of Turner et al. In this paper we assume that relationships (above) is coordination and interaction is cooperation as defined by Söderlund (2012) and Addyman (2020).

Customer Role: Yu (2017) looks at how the client's participation can influence project performance. Knowledge integration is the main contributor.

Cognitive Responses: Floris. and Cuganesan (2019) discuss the need to make a cognitive engagement with stakeholders, creating a dialogue with the right people at the right time on key issues, and guiding collaborative meaning to align stakeholders. Derakhshan et al. (2019) use attribution theory to explain the cognitive responses of external stakeholders, and their assignment of legitimacy to the project organization.

Emotional Responses: McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) identify five emotions: joy; love; surprise; sadness and fear. Williams et al. (2015) look at what makes the client happy, (joy). Invernizzi et al. (2018) show how inefficiencies in communication between the contractor and client can lead to frustration, (sadness). Turner and Müller (2004) show how adverse selection and moral hazard (Moe, 1995) can lead to the client experiencing discomfort, (fear). The client is never totally certain the contractor is competent or trustworthy. If the client has previous experience of working with the contractor their trust and comfort will be increased. Two key touchpoints Turner & Müller discuss are written and verbal reports made by the contractor. The client trusts written reports to give a valid picture of project progress, but not of looming risks and issues. The client trusts the verbal reports to give a valid picture of looming risks and issues, especially by reading the contractor's body language, but not of project progress.

3. Methodology

Based on the literature review, four propositions were developed:

- P1 On a project, the interaction between the client and contractors follows a four stage life-cycle: pre-project; tendering; project delivery; post project. Through this life-cycle, the client and contractor interact at a number of touchpoints.
- P2 At those touchpoints the client experiences cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural responses.
- P3 At the touchpoints the client measures their experience through three dimensions: relationship; reliability; and offering.
- P4 The value of the offering is assessed through five value creation elements: activities; resources; context; interactions; and client role.

A qualitative abductive approach was adopted to build on the findings of the literature review, (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012).. Five people were interviewed, Table 2. The interviews were semi-structured. The interviewees were asked to recall a project on which they had been a client representative, such as project manager or contract manager. They were then asked to identify touchpoints with the contractors through the project. Table 3 shows the interview topic guide. This suggests that the interviewees would be specifically asked about the dimensions of customer experience, value creation and emotional and

Table 2
Interviews.

Case	Organization	Position	Project	Mode
1	Government department managing road infrastructure in European country	Client Project director	Widening of a motorway as part of a major road upgrade	Face-to-face
2	Manager of rail infrastructure in a European country	Client Project Manager	New technology at a station	Face-to-face
3	Metro system in a European capital city	Client Project Manager	Station capacity enhancement	Skype
4	Company managing the metro, tram and bus services in a European capital city	PMO Manager	Merger of departments from several divisions into a single new division	WhatsApp voicemail
5	Company managing energy supply to a European Capital	Organizational Development PMO	Project to develop a new process for converting sewerage to fuel	Skype

Table 3
Interview topic guide.

Interview topics
The concept of Customer Experience is explained to the participant
The participant will be asked to recall a project on which they were a client representative
They will be asked to identify key touch points with the contractor
They will be asked to consider the importance of relationship, reliability and offering at the touch points
They will be asked to consider the significance of the five value creation elements, resources, activities, context, interactions and customer roles at the touch points
They will be asked if these stimulated any emotional responses
They will be asked what cognitive responses they stimulated.
They will be asked if they have any other memories of their experience with the contractor.

cognitive responses. In the event the interviewees were allowed to talk freely about the touch points, and the interviewer identified when they were talking about the dimensions, value creation elements and responses.

The data was analysed using a thematic approach based on Gioia et al. (2012). First, touchpoints were identified in the interviewee’s description of the project. Then deductive analysis was done on the touchpoints. The touchpoints were treated as first order concepts, and they were coded with second order themes grouped into aggregate dimensions. The four aggregate dimensions and associated second order themes come from the literature review with the aim of confirming the four propositions:

1. Project life-cycle: pre = project; tendering; project delivery; post-project.
2. Responses: cognitive; emotional; social; behavioural.
3. Dimensions: relationship; reliability; offering.
4. Value-creation: activities; resources; context; interactions; and client role.

However, from the interviewees’ descriptions a further aggregate dimension and associated themes was identified. Many interviewees mentioned the negotiation and signing of the contract. One mentioned two of the OECD’s principles of good governance, transparency and reciprocity, (Millstein et al.,1998). And so a fifth aggregate dimension and associated themes was created:

5. Governance: contract; transparency, reciprocity

That was an item of concern to the clients, but did not really affect their experiences.

Finally discourse analysis was conducted to identify any overarching concepts to emerge from the interviews. Two concepts were identified, reflected in two new propositions described later.

4. Results

The results of the four interviews are described. Table 4 summarises the touchpoints across the five interviews.

4.1. Motorway widening

The first interview was with a project director working for the government department for managing road infrastructure in a European country. The project was the widening of a motorway as part of a major road upgrade. The project was a Design-Build-Finance-Manage, (DBFM), project. This was the first time the country had done a DBFM project. The interviewee identified four touch points, Fig. 1.

Market consultation day: 200 people were invited to a day where the department briefed the market about the project and the fact that it was proposed to make it a DBFM project. This is pre-project. The main purpose of the day was to brief the market about the project and to garner the response to the fact it was a DBFM project. This is a cognitive response. But the client project team also began to make contact with potential bidders, building relationships, and getting to know them, a cognitive response.

Invitation tender: The department then entered a two stage tender evaluation process. Six consortia of contractors were invited to submit tenders, and two dialogue meetings were held with each consortium. There were several aims of the dialogue meetings:

- Do the consortia meet our requirements? This is an assessment of their reliability, through their competence and ethics.
- Does their offering meet our requirements? This is an assessment of their offering and its reliability.
- Does their approach to risk management make us feel comfortable? It was felt that some of the offered solutions would work in Southern Europe but not Northern Europe. This again is an assessment of their offering and its reliability, but the interviewee expressed it as feeling comfortable, which is an emotional; response (Turner and Müller, 2004),
- Some of the consortia would do design and build, whereas others would just manage the work, and sub-contract design and build. The department preferred the former since it would give greater ownership. The latter however might lead to better management of interfaces. This was an issue of how activities and resources would create value. It also engendered an emotional response.
- Finally the client made it clear they wanted a relationship based on transparency and reciprocity.

Negotiation: In the second stage of tender evaluation, the number of consortia was reduced to a short-list of three. In this stage six dialogue meetings were held. Two purposes stood out here:

- Joint problem solving: This was a difficult project, and it was necessary to use joint problem solving to find novel solutions. This required transparency and reciprocity, was indicative of the reliability of the offering, and was indicative of the value to be delivered.
- In the event, the department chose what they thought was the best value bid, which was not the cheapest. The value of the offering was important.

Project control meetings: Finally, the interviewee talked about project

Table 4
Summary of touchpoints.

Case	Interview	Touchpoints	Project stage	Aggregate Dimensions	
1	Motorway Widening	Market consultation day	Pre-project	Responses Dimensions	Cognitive Relationship
		Invitation to tender Phase 1	Tendering	Responses Dimensions Value creation	Cognitive, Emotional Reliability, Offering Resources, Activities
		Invitation to tender Phase 2	Tendering	Dimensions Value creation Governance	Offering Activities Contract
2	Technology Upgrade	Project delivery Familiarity	Project delivery Pre-project	Dimensions Value creation Responses Dimensions Governance	Relationship Offering Cognitive, Emotional, Social Relationship, Reliability
		Initial contact	Tendering	Responses Dimensions Governance	Cognitive, Emotional Reliability, Offering Contract, Transparency, Reciprocity
		Start-up meeting	Project delivery	Responses Dimensions Value creation	Cognitive, Emotional, Social, Behavioural Relationship, Reliability, Offering Activities
		Trip to London	Project delivery	Responses Dimensions	Cognitive, Emotional, Social, Behavioural Relationship, Offering
		Contract meeting	Tendering during Project delivery	Dimensions Value creation Governance Responses	Offering Resources, Activities Contract, Transparency, Reciprocity Cognitive
3	Metro Station Enhancement	Market testing	Tendering	Responses Dimensions	Cognitive Reliability
		Prequalification	Tendering	Responses Dimensions Value Creation Governance	Cognitive Relationship, Reliability, Offering Resources, Activities Contract
		Innovative tender	Tendering	Responses Dimensions Value Creation	Cognitive, Emotional, Social, Behavioural Relationship, Offering Resources, Activities, Interrelationship
4	Organizational Change	Market Research	Pre-project	Responses Dimensions	Cognitive Reliability
		Tender 1st round	Tendering	Responses Dimensions Value Creation	Cognitive Reliability, Offering Resources, Activities
		Tender 2nd round	Tendering	Responses Dimensions Value Creation Governance	Cognitive, Emotional, Behavioural Relationship, Reliability, Offering Resources, Activities, Context Contract
5	New Process Development	Project delivery Post project	Project delivery Post project	Responses Dimensions	Cognitive, Behavioural Relationship
		Specification	Pre-project	Responses Dimensions Governance	Behavioural, Sadness
		Initial contact	Tendering	Responses Dimensions Value Creation Governance	Cognitive, Behavioural Relationship, Offering Contract
		Negotiation	Tendering	Dimensions Value Creation Governance	Cognitive Reliability, Offering Interaction Contract
		Delivery Operation	Project delivery Post project	Dimensions Value Creation Responses	Relationship, Reliability, Offering Value, Interaction Cognitive, Behavioural

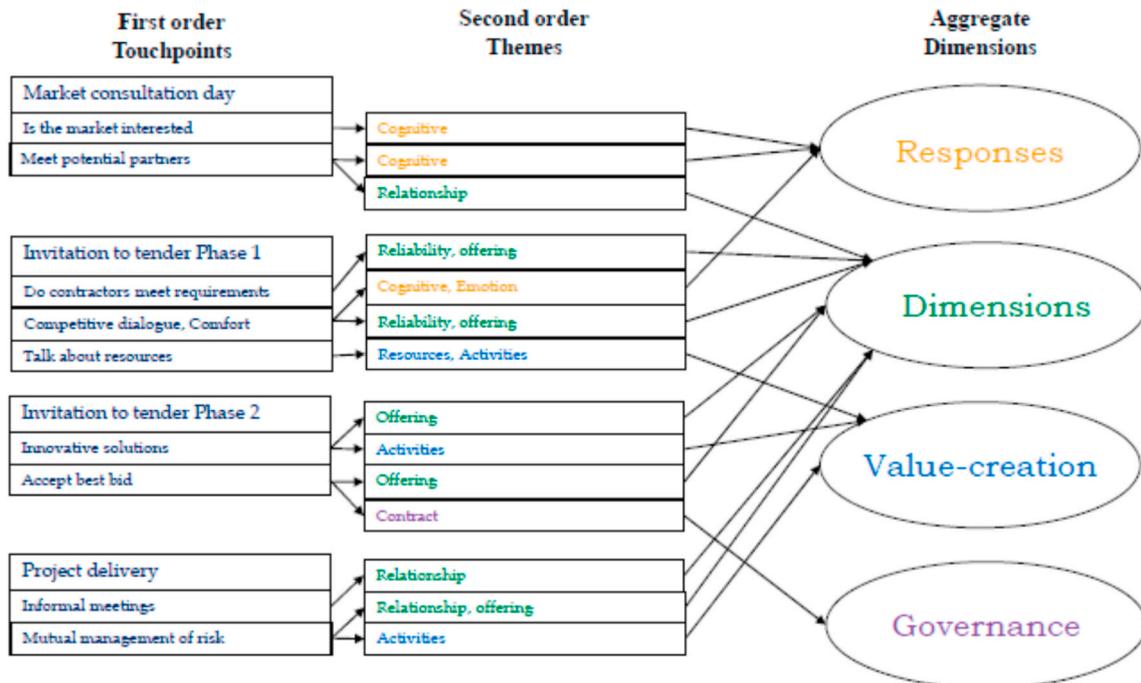


Fig. 1. Results of interview 1.

control meetings during project delivery. Both informal and formal meetings were held. Decisions were made at informal meetings but ratified at formal meetings. In the local dialect they describe informal meetings as “legs on the table” meetings. The informal meetings built relationships and allowed flexibility. Ate informal meetings joint problem solving, started during negotiation, remained important. That built relationships, but meant the best solution (offering) was obtained. It built trust and value, and was based on transparency and reciprocity.

4.2. Technology Upgrade

The second interview was with a former project manager at a government owned company responsible for managing the rail infrastructure in a European country. (He had now left the company and was working as a freelance consultant.) The project was effectively an alliance project, (Turner, 2006). He did not describe it as such, but that was its nature. The project was to install a new and novel facility based on new technology at a train station in the country. The same facility was to be installed at the main station in the country, and the second main station. He described the project at the second main station. It was a highly political project to be performed against a tight timescale. Both the end product of the project, and the method of delivery were highly uncertain, so as suggested by Turner (2004) an alliance was the appropriate form of contract. They did not choose the contractors through a bidding process. The project required an engineering (design) contractor, a construction contractor and a safety contractor. They chose three contractors they had substantial experience of working with at the station concerned, and formed a partnership with those three contractors. The interviewee mainly talked about the relationship with the engineering and construction contractors. The interviewee identified five touch points, Fig. 2.

Familiarity: The first touch point is pre-project, building up

familiarity on prior projects. It would in fact be post-project on the previous project. The client knew the contractors well, trusted their competence and ethics, and had an existing relationship with them. There having cognitive, emotional and social responses to their previous experience. It is building relationships and trust in their reliability.

Initial contact: This effectively is the tendering stage. The client made initial contact with the three contractors. They needed to find out if the contractors were willing to work to the tight schedule, and to identify risks with them, and explore solutions to the risks. That explored the offerings the contractors could make, and explored their reliability. They made an alliance contract based on open book, which gave transparency and reciprocity. And in the initial meeting they began the building of team spirit, starting the development of relationships on the project.

All the subsequent touchpoints discussed were in the project deliver stage.

Start-up meeting: This was a one day meeting with key players. It is the first part of project delivery. As with all start-up meetings building relationships was key. Also key was assessing people’s characters, understanding what potentially will make them angry, and confirming these are people you want to work with. A key part of that was getting people to role play people in the other parties, so they all understood what motivated each other. This involves cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural responses, and it is about building relationships and understanding reliability. In the start-up meeting they also discussed the project defining the offering.

Trip to London: The project team made trips to sites with similar facilities, but in particular a trip to London. This was profiled as a knowledge gathering event, so it was about gathering cognitive knowledge about the offering. But it was also about getting to know the other team members, and discovering that they are people you can work and play with. So it is about building relationships, but cognitive,

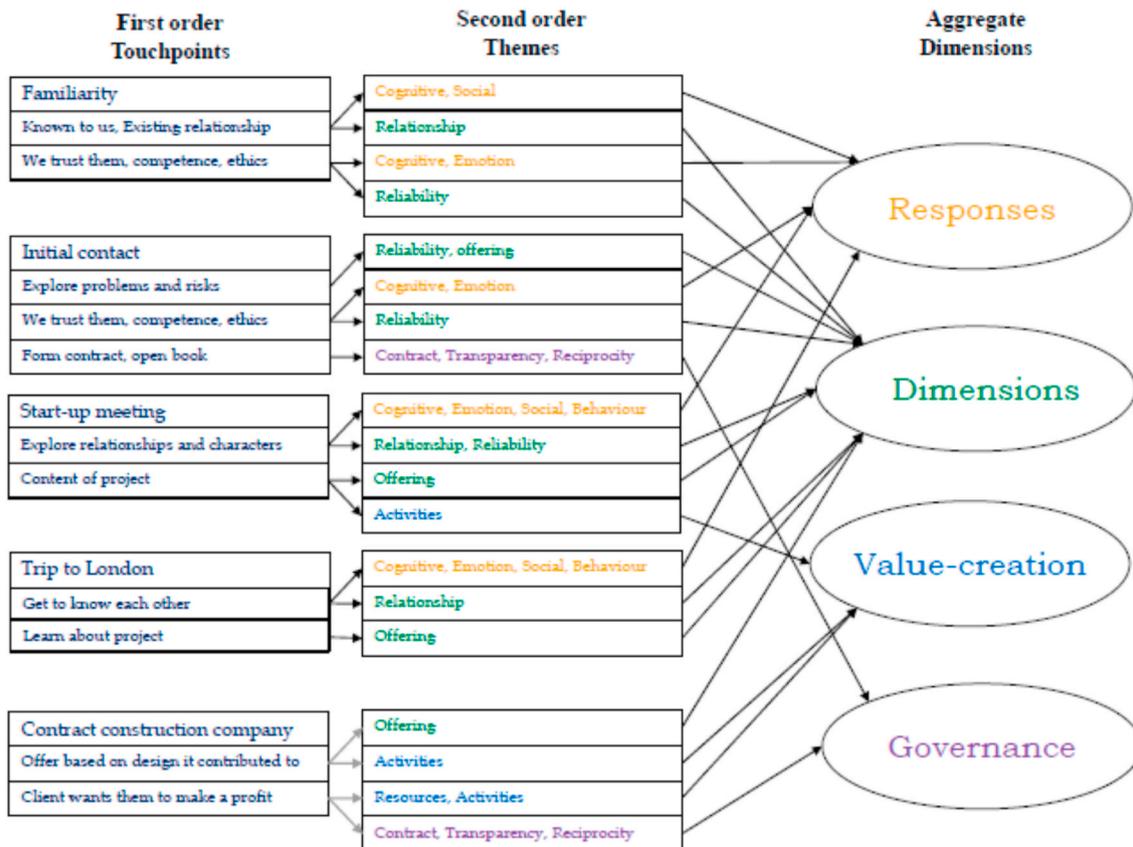


Fig. 2. Results if interview 2.

emotional, social and behavioural responses.

Contract meeting: At the end of the design phase, the construction contractor made a bid for the construction phase. So this was effective returning to the tender stage part way through the project delivery. The construction company made an offer based on the design to which they had contributed. They made a good believable offer. The client wanted them to make a reasonable profit, 4% which is about double the norm for construction companies in the country concerned. There are cognitive responses, learning about the contractors offering. The reliability of the offer is significant. All the elements of value creation are significant: activities, resources, interactions, context and client role. The client controlled the finance and made it available to the contractor.

Project control: A key issue occurred on the project. The facility was being developed for a new train service. The new train service was going to be late, so project team members wondered if they still had to complete to the tight timescale. The interviewee as project manager got the relevant ministry to confirm that they still wanted the facility to complete on time. Relationships were important in this discussion, and it involved cognitive and behavioural responses. The context influenced the value. Supporting what he had said earlier about the usefulness of most the team members being about the same age (40ish), the interviewee told me that the team member who created the most difficulty at this point was someone close to retirement who questioned the decisions.

4.3. Metro station enhancement

The third interview was with a former project manager at a government department responsible for managing the metro in a European capital city. The project was to increase capacity at a station. The nature of the project was described as Innovative Contractor Engagement and had many of the features of an alliance project, (Turner, 2006), but was not partnering. During the tendering stage, the contractors were shown the draft concept design and business plan. They had to suggest innovations which would reduce cost or increase benefit, and revise the business plan accordingly. The contract was awarded to the contractor that made the greatest improvement. The winning contractor improved the benefit to cost ratio from 2.4 in the original business case to 3.5. The

during project delivery there was a close working relationship between the client and contractor based on strong cooperation and coordination. This has many of the features of partnering while not being formal partnering. The interviewee identified four touch points, Fig. 3.

Market testing: This was similar to the first touch point in interview 1, and so was pre-project. Contractors who had previously worked with the department were approached to see if they were interested in this type of contract and whether they were willing to be involved. The purpose was to gather information only so the response was cognitive.

Pre-qualification: The second touchpoint was prequalification of the contractors, part of tendering. They issued an open invitation to tender to those contractors who had said they were interested. The aim was to assess potential contractors against a list of requirements and reduce the number of bidders to four. The aim again was knowledge gathering (cognitive response) and to assess the reliability of the contractors. The contractors were also asked if they were interested in proceeding.

Invitation to tender: The third touchpoint discussed was the invitation to tender. What followed was a six month dialogue. The client shared the draft concept design and business case with the contractors. They suggested innovation to the design and revised the business case. At the end of the dialogue, the invitation to tender was reissued and the contractors bid their revised business case. The winning bidder increased the benefit to cost ration from 2.4 to one to 3.5 to one. The client’s response is cognitive, and they are assessing the contractors’ offerings and reliability. Value creation elements are activities and resources. Innovations were bought off the unsuccessful bidders. They were unique to the project so had no value other than on the project, but the contractors were rightfully paid for the innovations. The value creation element is activities. During the six months dialogue, the client formed a working routine with the contractor that would do the work. Addyman (2020) describes the value of being able to maintain project capability by transferring routines at temporal transitions on projects. The interviewee said:

Routines are the foundation of organizational capability ... repeatable, recognizable patterns of interdependent action by multiple parties. How can you be in a repeatable, recognizable pattern if you haven’t actually spoken to each other?

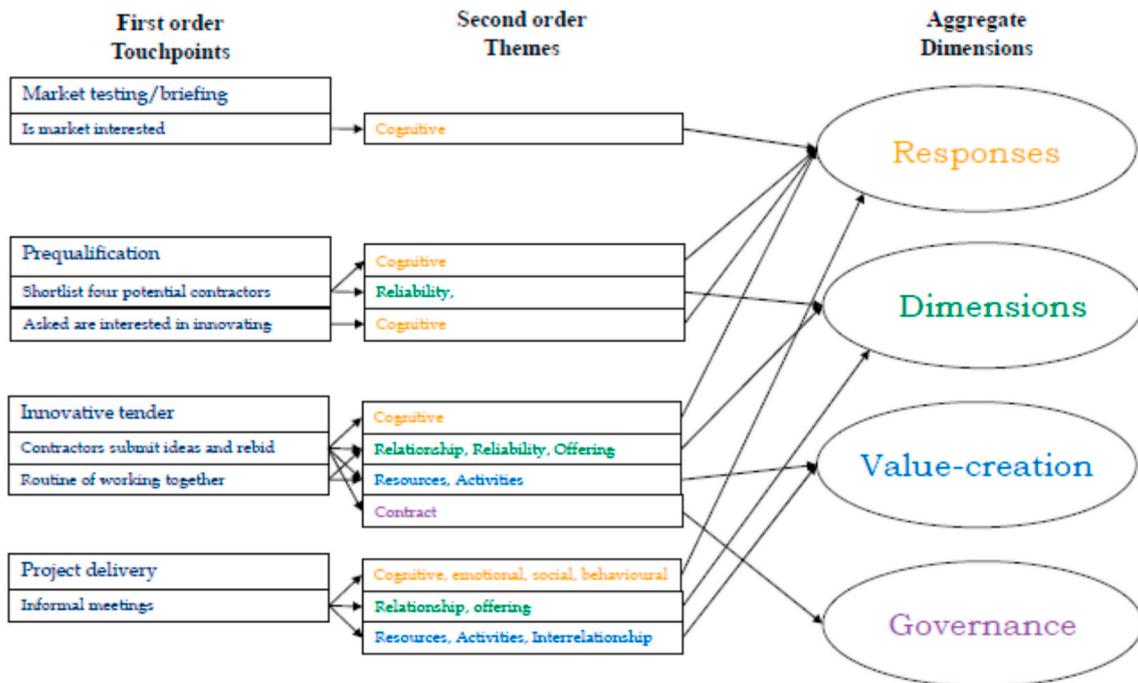


Fig. 3. Results of interview 3.

Turner et al. (2019 describe how in the onshore oil and gas industry, clients will not let their bidders talk to them during the tender phase. This is for fairness so one contractor does not gain an advantage. But Addyman (2020) says that this results in a loss of organizational capability. The interviewee also said:

What I think is unique about what we did is we found that balance between competition and early engagement.

The client is building interaction and relationships, cooperation and coordination.

Project control: The last touchpoint discussed was project delivery and in particular project control meetings. Project delivery was two stages, design and construction, but the relationship was the same in both stages. The working relationship was carried forward from the tendering stage, giving interaction and relationships as just discussed. But it increased capability (Addyman, 2020), giving reliability, defined activities to be done by the contractor and the client's role. Project control meetings were very informal in nature. Decisions were made at informal meetings and ratified in the contract through variation orders and other document control. On complex projects it is necessary to take decisions at informal meetings to have the required flexibility. This is very similar to what interviewee 1 said. The responses to the informal meetings were cognitive, emotional social and behavioural. The dimensions were offering, reliability and relationships, and the value creation elements were interaction and client role.

4.4. Organizational change

Interview 4 was with a manager at a company managing the metro, buses and trams in a European capital city. The project was an organization change project. Several departments in different divisions were doing the same thing, so it was decided to merge them into a new division. This project related to the merger of the departments into one

division. A second project would rationalise the systems used by the departments in the one new division. Six touchpoints were described, Fig. 4. This organizational change projects followed a very similar cycle to the preceding three constructions projects.

Market Research: The work is to be done by a consulting company. The first step was to identify five potential partners. Again this is pre-project they needed to have experience of transport, speak the local language and understand the peculiarities of the laws and technology. Previous experience of working with the firm was useful.

1st Round Tender: The number of potential partners was reduced from five to three. They were asked for a concept and initial price estimate.

2nd Round Tender: The consultant to do the work was chosen. They had to present their concept and their team. They also had to fit with the local culture.

Project Delivery: The work was done. The client defined the objective but the consultants advised on the route, and helped engage stakeholders. Progress meetings were held.

Post-project: The consultants continued to help with stakeholder engagement. But what caused sadness is they began to lose interest and drift away.

4.5. New process development

Interview 5 was with a manager in a firm managing energy supply to a European capital city. The company wanted to convert sewerage into fuel capable of being burnt in its furnaces. This was a two stage product development projects. In the first stage three companies were asked to prototype potential manufacturing solutions to achieve that aim. That stage has been completed and the company is now in negotiation with all three companies to choose one of them to build six plants to perform the duty. The prototyping project went through the four stages identified by Lecoeuvre and Deshayes (2006) and Turner et al. (2019). The current negotiations are in the post-project phase of that cycle. But the construction project is in the tendering phase of its four stage cycle. Four

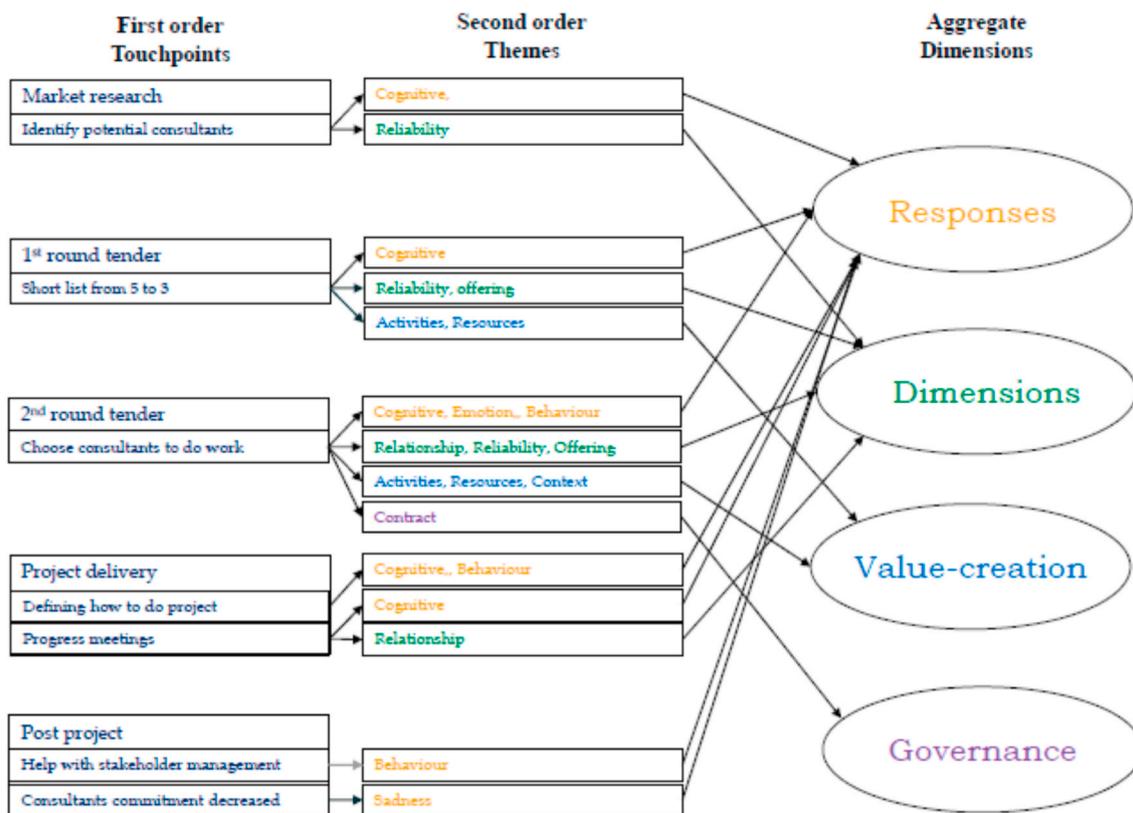


Fig. 4. Results of interview 4.

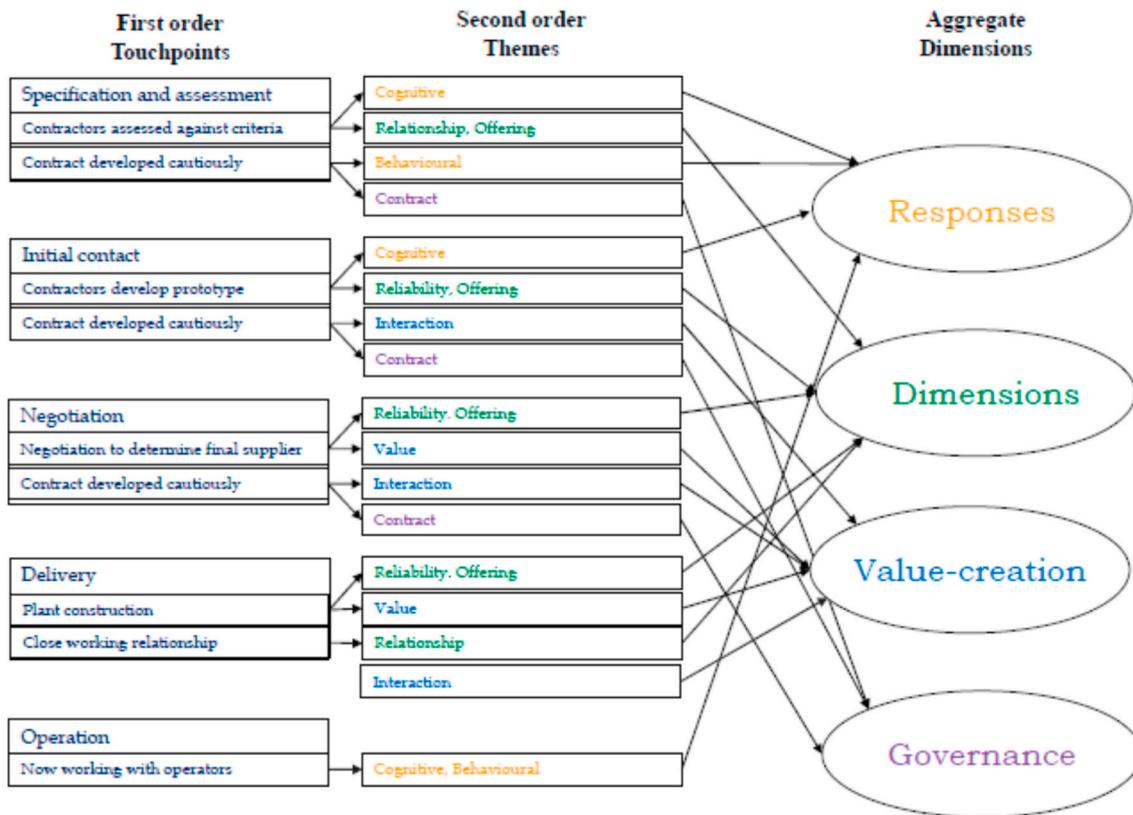


Fig. 5. Results of interview 5.

touch points were identified, Fig. 5.

Specification: The contractors were given the specification and are assessed against criteria. This is pre-project moving into the initial phase of tendering. The assessment is pre-qualification. The contract was constantly developed.

Prototype: The contractors develop their prototype. This is assessed against the requirements. The development of a prototype is part of tendering. The contractors are showing they can meet the requirement. The contract is further refined.

Negotiation: The best prototype is chosen based on functionality and value. The final contract for delivery of the plant is signed.

Delivery: Several plants are built. There will be a close working relationship at control meetings. I asked the interviewee given that several plants were to be built would one contractor build all of them. He said it was possible that two contractors may be chosen.

Operation: The plants move into operation. New contractors will probably be chosen to operate the plants since the contractors building them are not skilled at operation. That requires new working relationships to be developed.

A key issue for this firm was they wanted to build relationships with the three suppliers, but as an energy company in the public sector they have strict procurement rules. They suffered issues experienced by clients in the onshore oil and gas industry, (Turner et al., 2019), but managed to work around it. As suggested by Addyman (2020) they see advantage in carrying forward working relationships through the four stages of both projects. But because of their strict procurement rule, the relationships need to be kept at interaction (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019), and cooperation, (Söderlund, 2012). However, that enables them to have good working relationships to carry through the four stages. The relationships will break up in the fourth stage of the second project, because the suppliers will switch from construction teams to operations teams, and the client representatives will also switch to operations.

5. Discussion

Our two research questions are:

- RQ1 what has been written about client experience on projects?
- RQ2 what is the nature of client experience on projects?

Table 1 shows our findings about what people had written on client experience on projects. However, nobody had approached it from a marketing perspective.

Through the deductive thematic analysis we confirmed propositions P1 to P4. All five interviewees' projects followed the four stage life-cycle suggested by Lecoivre and Deshayes (2006) and Turner et al. (2019). However, the Technology Upgrade project went back from project delivery to tendering when the reconfirmed the construction contractor's contract for project execution at the end of design. On the new process delivery project, they were prototyping as part of tendering. Effectively they ran tendering and delivery in parallel. All the interviewees experienced client experience responses suggested by Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) definition of client experience. The three dimensions suggested by Kuppelweiser and Klaus (2020), relationships reliability and offering were experienced, and the five value creation elements suggested by McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019), were also significant.

Through the discursive analysis two further propositions were identified.

- P5 Unlike in retail, on projects the client manages the interactions with the contractors. In retail the customer approaches the vendor, but the vendor manages the interactions. The way the vendor manages the interactions influences the customers satisfaction and loyalty. On projects, the client manages the interactions and so influences their own experiences, and the contractors satisfaction and loyalty.

P6 If the client can build a good relationship and interaction with the contractor during the tender phase, that can create routines in their way of working, which if carried forward to project delivery can improve project performance.

In retail the supplier controls the interaction. The purchaser wishes to buy a product and seeks out potential vendors, but once the customer makes contact, it is the vendor that controls the interactions. This is the emphasis of the customer experience literature. Vendors that manage the customer experiences at those interactions perform better than those that do not, (Klaus, 2015). Some companies, such as KPMG and Google, employ customer experience managers to manage the customer experiences at the touchpoints, (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). But on projects it is the clients that control the interactions. Clients invite contractors to participate, and then manage the series of touchpoints at which they interact with the contractors.

At those touch points, clients have cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural responses, and they manage the relationships, and the contractor's reliability and offering. They also assess value through the activities performed and resources provided by the contractor, interactions with the contractor and their own role. There was less of a focus on context. Interestingly, the contractor will also have experiences at the touchpoints. Perhaps research in project management needs to focus on how the client manages the contractor experiences.

But the contractors also have experiences at those touchpoints, and the way the client manages the touchpoints can influence the contractor's satisfaction and loyalty. It could also influence whether the contractor works according to a principal-agent relationship or a stewardship relationship, (Müller, 2019; Turner, 2022). Turner (2022) suggests a stewardship relationship will often lead to better project performance. It can also influence the nature of the working contractual arrangement. In the Technology Upgrade project, the management of the touch points led to a success alliance arrangement.

In retail, customers follow a three stage journey through their purchase, pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase, (see for instance Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Following Lecoeuvre and Deshayes (2006) and Turner et al. (2019) we identified a four stage journey for projects, pre-project, tendering, project delivery, and post projects. All of the interviewees followed this four stage journey. For some the project delivery stage was divided into design and construction. But the nature of the interactions was the same at both those sub-stages. However, on projects, as in retail, the same client experience responses, dimensions and value-creation elements were observed.

The Metro Station Enhancement project highlighted the importance of carrying forward routines and ways of working from tendering to project-delivery. Routines are the foundation of organizational capability and are repeatable, recognizable patterns of interdependent action by multiple parties, (Addyman, 2020). Contractors in the onshore oil and gas industry interviewed by Turner et al. (2019) said that their clients would not allow them to talk to them during the bid phase, to maintain fairness between the bidders. But all our interviewees reported working closely with their contractors during the tendering phase, and the close working relationships were carried forward to project delivery.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

This paper extends the research on customer experience to projects. However, we see here that the client controls the interactions and so manages their own experiences, and that of the contractors. It raises the question about what the client should be doing to manage the contractor's experiences.

5.2. Practical contribution

This research has shown how clients can manage their experiences on projects to improve overall project performance.

5.3. Further research

This research raises the question about what are the contractor's experiences on projects? How can the client manage those experiences to improve the contractor's satisfaction and loyalty, and achieve appropriate governance and contractual relationships? How does this fit with the concepts of agency theory and stewardship theory, (Müller, 2019)?

Declaration of competing interest

No conflict of interest.

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