

# EMBODIED CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN GROUP FITNESS CONTEXT

## - IDENTIFICATION OF DIFFERENT CUSTOMER TYPES

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore embodied customer experience in group fitness context and identify different types of group fitness customers among their motives and important factors affecting to their ultimate service experience.

**Design/Methodology/approach** – The phenomenological approach is stressed: the paper studies the embodied service experience by focusing on individual's interaction between other actors and the culture and environment he/ she is living into. The interpretive analysis draws on naturalistic observations and narrative interviews carried out among group fitness customers in Finland.

**Findings** – Paper draws connection between the concept of co-creation and embodied service experience in group fitness context. Paper explores comprehensively the factors affecting to customer's ultimate service experience and identifies different group fitness customer types.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study expands the concept of co-creation to the academic conversation around embodied service experience. The group fitness context is suitable for this as embodiment is strongly present in creation of customer experience and affecting to the ultimate experience in various ways.

**Practical implications** – For practitioners, this analysis and Identification of different group fitness customer types provides practical insight for managers to manage and improve their operations to meet the needs and expectations of the customers with different motives.

**Originality/value** – The paper explores the embodied service experience in group fitness context by using phenomenological approach and narrative interviews to capture the special characteristics of embodied service experience and identify different customer types.

Key words: Customer experience, embodiment, co-creation, group fitness, narratives

# 1 Introduction

During the last few decades, marketing researchers have studied the formation of customer experience in different fields (f. ex retail, online environment and tourism), but it seems that there is just a little research on in-firm service experiences. In particular, researchers call for more research how the service experiences are formed (Edvardsson et al., 2005; Pareigis et al., 2012). In addition, the social interaction as a part of service experience is still a subject on which very little research has been conducted so far and needs further investigation (Akaka, Vargo & Schau, 2015).

This paper defines service experience as embodied and comprehensive: customer is experiencing the service through his/ her body and mind. Embodiment and bodywork (term for work that individuals undertake on their own bodies) have been under the research (see Coffey, 2013). Embodied performance has been studied in service economics as a key part in many occupations but customers' embodied performance and its relation to the total service experience remains unexplored. In this paper, embodied service experience is explored in group fitness context. Group fitness is defined as a service setting, where a group of customers are working out in a class led by a professional instructor. Group fitness exist in a variety of formats, for example chorographical dance classes, indoor cycling, core conditioning, yoga, functional training and muscle endurance training (Wing, 2014).

Service experience and customer experience have often been used as synonyms in contemporary research (Klaus & Maklan, 2011). We argue that there are some nuances and differences between these two terms. Term 'service experience' relates to situation, where the experience is formed in service context and usually contains more direct interaction between providers, customers and other possible stakeholders involved in the service encounter (Tax, 2013). We are using the term 'service experience' instead of 'customer experience' in this study to highlight the emphasis of direct interaction on customer's experience formation.

Several studies have developed models to explain and measure service quality in the fitness industry (e.g. Kim and Kim, 1995; Chang and Chelladurai, 2003; Lam and Chang., 2005; Polyakova and Mirza, 2016). Previous research (Arnould and Price, 1993; Küpers, 1998; Schembri and Sandberg, 2011) has confirmed that consumers do not passively receive service quality but actively co-create the quality of the service they experience. This view is strongly present also in this study, even though it does not focus on service quality but on co-creation of ultimate service experience. This study investigates the phenomena eyes open and does not make any remarkable pre-assumptions but rather analyzes the results that raise up from narrative interviews made among and make interpretation among them. Polyakova and Mirza (2016) call for deeper research on customer's role in service co-creation and this study is answering to this call by exploring the service experience and its' co-creational aspects in group fitness context.

In the context of physical fitness, customers attend to group fitness classes, exercise and through this co-create service in in interaction with their environment and actors involved. The reasons, or motives to participate to group fitness classes can be formed by various factors (Ryan et al., 1997; Afthinos et al., 2005; Mullen and Whaley, 2010) and have an impact on the ultimate service experience. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) argued that psychological factors as an individual's motivations and self-competence also influence customers' perceptions of service quality and their satisfaction. As service experience is seen as a very personal construct at the rational, emotional,

physical and other levels (Gentile et al., 2007), it becomes important to explore the phenomena and find out, what kind of customer types can be identified among the different emphasis of significant factors when constructing the ultimate service experience.

Group fitness context captures the complexity of the formation of service experience. Thinking simply, it can be said that customers are attending to group fitness classes to improve their fitness, burn calories, building and stretching muscles and improving cardiovascular functioning. This perspective focuses only on the physical body, which consists of muscular fibres, bones, circulation etc. and leaves out other aspects of service experience. In this paper we argue that there are various elements, which are creating value for the customer and making the service experience valuable and relevant. Customers are interpreting the experience and reflecting with the environment through their body and mind.

This study expands the concept of co-creation to the academic conversation around service experience and fitness industry. The concept of co-creation has mostly been related among academics and practitioners to new product and service development (Payne et al., 2008; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2003), ideation, design and development (Nambisan, 2002), but research related to co-creation and service experience is still scarce. In this paper co-creation of service experience is seen as customer's reflection and interaction in his/ her service ecosystem with other actors and the environment. The paper studies embodied service experience in group fitness context and highlights the impact of servicescape (Bitner, 1992), social interaction (Jaakkola et al., 2015) and exercise itself to the experience.

Empirical work about outcomes of co-creation is still limited (Carbonell et al., 2009). Extant literature has associated co-creation with firm's objectives and efficiency gains, like minimization of new service development costs (O'hern and Rindfleisch, 2008), reduced risk of failures (Hoyer et al., 2010) and closer fit with customer needs (Fang et al., 2008). Co-creation has also been studied in online context (Rust and Huang, 2014). We argue, that expanded possibilities for service provision should not shift the focus too much from in-firm services, where actors are creating service experience at the same time, at the same place, in direct interaction. The impact of co-creation on the customer experience has not been under the scope, even though co-creation is strongly related to customer retention and a way to create superior customer experiences and competitive advantage, which is hard to copy.

The purpose of the study is to describe and analyze group fitness customer's service experience and find out the relevant attributes of service ecosystem for customer's service experience. The study answers to the following questions:

1. How are the different elements of service ecosystem (servicescape, interaction and exercise per se) affecting to customer's service experience?
2. What kind of customer types can be identified?

The need for deeper understanding of role and formation of the customer's experiences has been recognized as a key marketing phenomena (e.g. Edvardsson et al., 2005). The importance of experience has been recognized also by service-dominant (S-D) logic, where the focus is on the experiential nature of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Phenomenological perspective on service experience has shifted the focus from the view, where the value is delivered from the service

provider to customer to the perspective, where the value is contextually and uniquely interpreted and experienced by the individual and that the customer as an active role as co-creator of both value and service experience itself. In addition, interaction is not only existing in the dyadic relationship between service provider and customer but also between other actors (Jaakkola et al., 2015).

## **2 Conceptual development**

This section captures the theoretical background of this study. It brings together all relevant theoretical aspects: unique characteristics of group fitness industry as an ecosystem, embodied experience and co-creation of service experience. There is still relatively small amount of studies around co-creation of service experience (Carbonell et al., 2009), which underlines the importance of this study. A study, which examines co-creation of service experience from the point of view of embodied experience brings also a fresh perspective to the academic literature.

### **2.1 Group fitness industry as a service ecosystem**

Group fitness context provides a complex but fascinating service ecosystem to capture the essence of service experience co-creation. This study lies on service dominant logic-based perspective on service ecosystems, which suits well to sports related research as it highlights and integrates the view, where interactions and exchanges of service (group fitness) occur among various stakeholders (e.g. customers and instructors) at various levels of the sport service ecosystem (micro, meso and macro) (Tsiotsou, 2016). Service ecosystem is defined as “relatively self-contained, self-adjusting systems of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchanges” (Vargo and Lusch, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

Group fitness industry covers all kind of physical exercise, where a group of customers are working out in a class led by a professional instructor. There is a great variety of group fitness classes from yoga to indoor cycling and from Zumba to functional training. In which the variety of group fitness classes is vastly wide, so are the customers consuming these services. People with different kind of demographic background (gender, age, weight, length) and different kind of reasons are attending to group fitness classes worldwide. In this study group fitness context gives an opportunity to view embodied customer experience and its relation to the concept of co-creation. Physical exercising itself is experienced clearly in individual's body, but also the physical environment and other actors involved are influencing to the total experience at the same time. The service is a sum of customer's interpretation through his/ her all senses, mind and body.

In general, fitness industry has faced tightened competition in recent years and service providers have recognized the importance of developing effective market strategies (Lee et al., 2011). Creating a unique service experience is a way to create sustainable competitive advantage. In Europe involvement in the training for fitness has increased the last few years as young Europeans are becoming more likely to exercise in fitness centers than their older counterparts (European Commission, 2010). Today 40 000 sports and fitness facilities in Europe attract over 40 million customers (European Health & Fitness Association, 2012).

Firms providing group fitness classes, as other service-oriented firms too, possess the special characteristics of intangibility, perishability, inseparability and heterogeneity (see Ghobadian et al.

1994). In group fitness class service provider creates the service at the same time as full consumption by the customers takes place. Instructor is not only delivering the service to the customers but rather it is co-created with the customers. One unique characteristic of group fitness is that there are always a group of people consuming the service at the same time. This makes service experience in group fitness highly interactional, not only between the instructor and customers (Polyakova and Mirza, 2016), but also between the customers. Customers can influence to another's total service experience and this is a factor, to which service provider has just a little or no direct control. This raises the importance of service provider's need to know the customer, his / her expectations and factors, which are affecting to the total service experience. In fact, service providers should rather focus on becoming involved in their customers' lives (Grönroos & Voima 2012, 134). The impact of interactional and social aspects of service experience in group fitness should not be underestimated.

Consumers in the fitness industry are now more demanding, and clubs are faced with the challenge of meeting their high expectations (Walsh, 2013). These expectations can be related to various factors from selection of group fitness classes in the club to the general atmosphere and from instructors' ability to keep the class to physical environment (lights, music, design) etc. There are factors to which service provider can easily affect but there are also a lot of factors to which service provider has no direct influence. One of these factors is the interaction between the customers, which is one factor affecting to customer's experience. Group fitness classes are highly tied to social interaction and this factor, whose impact is particularly interesting to explore. This study aims to provide insight and tools for service providers to be able to manage their service setting in more efficient and determined way.

## **2.2 Embodied experience**

This study looks service experience in group fitness from embodied perspective, which posits that experience is not the outcome of mental representations but rather related to the lifeworld linked to the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). According to this view experience is co-determined by the environment and the body (Yakhlef, 2015). Physical exercise is affecting to a person both physically and mentally: customer is feeling the exercise in his/ her body (e.g. physical strain, muscle growth or durability development) and mind (e.g. fatigue, joy, grit and success). Physical exercise is experienced through all senses (seeing, touching, smelling, etc.). Experience is not only the outcome of what goes into their minds or solely what the servicescape makes possible for them (Yakhlef, 2015). Rather, service experience is an outcome of an interactive process between these two – “a process outcome of which is often contingent, emergent and unpredictable” (Yakhlef, 2015). Embodiment and ways of moving the body, experience and spatial environments are not separate but configure one another (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

There are a variety of studies, which demonstrate how the body has become a central field of political, economic and cultural activity in post-industrial societies and important basis of subjectivity and agency for contemporary people (Valtonen, 2013). There are several streams of research around this theme. One stream is looking body and embodiment from phenomenological or psychological perspective and focuses on the ways in which embodied consumers experience bodily ideas in different context of consumption (Sayre 1999; Askegaard, Gertsen and Langer 2002; Colls, 2006). For example, Parviainen (2011) explored the phenomenological distinction between

the physical body and lived body among group fitness instructors. Embodied performance has been studied in service economics as a key part in many occupations but customers' embodied performance and its relation to the total service experience remains unexplored. Even if the body has become an intensive focus for management and organization studies, theoretical conceptions of the body behind these analyses have remained elusive. Yakhlef (2015) wrote a theoretical paper about customer experience in retail context and argued, that there is a real need for taking embodied approach to customer experience under the scope. This need highlights the importance of this study, too.

Distinction between physical and lived body (Parviainen, 2011; Husserl, 1960) can be applied as a framework also when observing customers' experience in group fitness. One level of embodied experience is a physical change happening in one's body (physical body). Physical body is modified by building muscles, burning fat and calories, stretching muscles and improving cardiovascular functioning. In group fitness, a body is much more than material entity and physical change is not the only factor affecting to customer's total experience. The lived body, person's thoughts, feelings and emotions during the exercise, are important factors too. These factors are not related only to the exercise itself but also servicescape and other customers are influencing to one's experience (Shilling, 1993).

Phenomenologically analytical methods give appropriate tools to identify both active (gestural) and passive (the corporeal basis of the individual) aspects of the expressivity of the body that influence interaction between the customers, instructor and other customers (Parviainen, 2011). Phenomenologically oriented researchers have focused on the lived bodies of people as active subjects of feeling, thinking, learning and social interaction (Parviainen, 2011). This study comprises the worldview, where body and world interpenetrate each other (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). According to Yakhlef (2015) this approach stresses the relational, reciprocal, interactive, spatial process between the human body and its physical and social environment (including objects and other bodies).

## **2.3 Co-creation of service experience**

Characteristics of group fitness service has strong links to the service-dominant logic (see Vargo and Lusch, 2004), which sees customer always as a co-creator of the value in service setting. Among service-dominant logic value is created in the interaction between the company and the customer (Cova and Dalli 2009, Schau et al. 2009). This perception develops the traditional view, where the value was created only by the company to the customer (Grönroos and Voima 2013; Etgar, 2008), but it still does not take account the importance of the interactional process between the customers as a value creating element. We argue that in the context of group fitness, where the service delivery is based on collaboration and interaction, all actors involved should be seen as active creators of service experience (e.g. Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Customers do not only attend, but also actively participate in the service production and consumption. Group fitness services require a close relationship and a high level of involvement between the service provider and customers. Both the service provider and the customer are creating the service experience and interaction by reflecting the situation by their individual and unique meanings, symbols, assumptions and background.

Research focused particularly on co-creation of service experience is still quite limited (Carbonell et al., 2009). Verleye (2015) conducted a research, where co-creation was studied related to new product and service development processes. Verleye's (2015) study viewed co-creation from customer's perspective and focused on the outcomes of co-creation. Study discusses about the importance of expected co-creational benefits, things customers expect in return for co-creation. Total co-creation experience depends on the degree to which these expected co-creation benefits are met. Based on the previous literature (Etgar, 2008; Hoyer et al. 2010; Rager et al. 2013) around service experience co-creation, Verleye (2015) argues that overall co-creation experience is driven by six dimensions: hedonic experience (actually getting hedonic benefits in return for co-creation), cognitive experience (actually getting cognitive benefits in return for co-creation), personal experience (actually getting personal benefits in return for co-creation), pragmatic experience (actually getting pragmatic benefits in return for co-creation) and economic experience (actually getting economic benefits in return for co-creation). These dimensions can help to understand the formation of co-created service experience but the model does not perfectly fit to this study. Verleye's (2015) study concerns service experience co-creation in online-environment whereas this study particularly focuses on in-firm services, which are created in direct interaction between service provider and customers. For example characteristics of co-creation environment vary between Verleye's (2015) and this study: level of technology and connectiveness in online-environment are not relevant for this study but in this study these elements can be turned to concern the servicescape of group fitness studio. It can be stated that this study views service experience co-creation in new and fresh light as the focus is on in-firm services.

Jaakkola et al. (2015) emphasize the social and interactional aspects of service experience co-creation in their extensive literature review. They define service experience co-creation as following: "service experience co-creation occurs when interpersonal interaction with other actors in or beyond the service setting influences an actor's subjective response to or interpretation of the elements of the service". Twelve dimensions of service experience co-creation are presented: collective, customer-led, beyond the service setting, broad time frame, systematic, imaginary, individual, provider-led, in the service setting, narrow time frame, dyadic and lived. These dimensions highlight the complex nature of service experience co-creation. The influence of entire service ecosystem is affecting to the co-creational process from physical surroundings to interactional aspects between all actors involved. The interaction between different actors is seen as the essence of service experience co-creation, which is also in the core of this study. Jaakkola's et al. (2015) framework is guiding this research and emphasizing the concept of service experience as a phenomena, which is shaped during and beyond the service setting.

Customer is not consuming the service in dyadic relationship with the instructor but also all the other participants have an influence on his/her experience in one way or another. Creating a service experience in group fitness context is seen as a collective and circular process: both lived and imaginary experiences are shaping customer's current service experiences (Helkkula et al., 2012). In addition to the interaction between the actors, there are various other elements affecting to customer's overall experience. Customer is observing and assembling his/ her overall experience in the service ecosystem based on his/ her interaction between other actors but also the environment.

Research on service co-creation in fitness-related industries has so far been limited. Extant literature has focused on sporting event and sport fans (e.g. Funk and James, 2001; McDonald & Karg, 2014).

Chelladurai (1998) and Cunningham (2013) are emphasizing the need for further development of theories and models for sport management. This supports the fact that the empirical studies around S-D logic and concept of co-creation are needed (Woratschek et al., 2014).

In the context of physical fitness, customers participate in exercise and through this co-create service guided by a reason for the involvement. Customers have different kind of motivation to attend to group fitness and these motives have an impact to their ultimate service experience. These motives are discussed in the next section of this paper.

## **2.4 Motives to attend to group fitness**

Sport related product is actually more elusive than many realize. Customers expect different benefits and are motivated by different factors related to the service experience and not all dimensions are relevant to all customers (Verleye 2016, 324). Motive can be defined as a drive, stimulus or reason why people do something (Roberts, 1992). In the context of group fitness, motives can be described as reasons that people give engaging in physical activity. The terms “participation motives” and “reasons for exercising” are suggested as being interchangeable (Markland and Ingledem 2007).

This heterogeneity of customers must be taken into account when measuring service experiences. It should also be noted that motives can come either within the person (intrinsic motives) or from the outside (extrinsic motives) (Thatcher et al., 2009). Ko and Pastore (2004) argue that generally in service business the focus of customer’s purchase is mostly on the after-use benefits and outcomes, not the service itself, but in the sport industry, a customer's experience is a major outcome. Motives of group fitness customers are usually varied and difficult to predict: some people are highly motivated to physical surroundings of the firm, some people appreciate the physical exercise itself and some people are motivated to feel and see the physical change, which is caused by the exercise. In addition to the motives related to physicality, group fitness classes can attract consumers from many other kind of motives. For example, risk-taking, stress reduction, affiliation, social facilitation, self-esteem, achievement, skill mastery, aesthetics, and self-actualization are all potential motivation factors for the sport participant (Milne and McDonald, 1999). Customers consume group fitness services to seek improved physical fitness, enjoyment (Chelladurai, 1998), thrill (Deighton, 1992), and social interaction (Milne and McDonald, 1999).

Customers can be mostly motivated by the exercise itself. It should be noted that this motive has two different aspects. Customers can be inspired by the service product itself (certain group fitness class) and/ or by the outcome of service consumption (e.g., physical change, skill development). One general motive to attend to group fitness classes is to gain actual physical change, for example increased fitness level or skill or performance development. These can be seen as tangible benefits of the service (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Class itself can also offer different kind of intangible benefits which increase customers’ motivation to participate. Group fitness class can be seen as an social experience, which is tightly intertwined with the interactional aspect of service experience. Customers can feel social gratification (Ko and Pastore, 2004) of enjoying with others the same activity (Milne and McDonald, 1999).

In group fitness, interaction can be seen as a big factor affecting to customer’s overall service experience (Ko and Pastore, 2004). Interaction is related how the service is delivered (Grönroos and



Voima) and interaction occurs at two levels. Group fitness service is delivered through the interaction between the instructor (service provider) and customers. Instructor's attitude, expertise and behavior are elements (Brady and Cronin 2001), which are affecting to customer's service experience. This level of interaction has been widely noted in previous literature but the research on the interaction between the customers and its' impact to the customer's overall experience is still scarce. Social aspects and interaction can be the greatest motive to attend group fitness classes to some people. As a high level of contact exists during the service delivery, it is clear that customers are influencing to each other's service experience by their presence, attitude and behaviour.

Servicescape (e.g., Bitner, 1992) refers here to the physical environment, where the service is delivered. Servicescape can be divided to the ambience, design and equipment (Ko and Pastore, 2004). Ambience consists of nonvisual aspects of the environment such as temperature, lightning, noise, scent and music (Bitner, 1992; Brady and Cronin, 2001). Design is related to service environment's layout and architecture. This refers both to functional and aesthetic dimensions of the layout (Bitner, 1992; Brady and Cronin, 2001). Equipment naturally refers to the instruments, which are used in group fitness classes. Servicescape's influence to customer's service experience as it has been shown that servicescape is affecting both to individual's behaviour and social interactions (Bitner, 1992). Behaviors such as small group interaction, friendship formation, participation, aggression, withdrawal and helping have all been shown to be influenced by environmental conditions (Holahan, 1982).

It is a bundle of different kind of elements, which is affecting to customer's overall service experience. As said, service experience is always unique and there are various motives to attend to group fitness classes. Even though the motives would be similar, emphasis may vary. It should also be noted that previous literature highlights the importance of interaction between service provider and customer but the knowledge about customer-to-customer interaction and its influences stays still fragmented. This research is resolving the motives of customers to consume group fitness services and figures out, how these motives are affecting to customer's evaluation of the overall service experience.

### **3 Data collection**

Qualitative methods are becoming more common in sports and fitness research, but there is still only little imagination used when choosing the method for the study (Shaw and Hoerber, 2016). There is a call for more innovative, fresh and critical approaches to research in this field (Amis and Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Shaw and Hoerber, 2016). This study is answering this call and leaning strongly on ethnographic tradition. Narrative interviews will be used as a method to collect the data as real-life stories told by the customers consuming the group fitness services will give a unique approach to the phenomena.

Empirical data of the study will be collected in one group fitness studio in Finland. Research data will be gathered by narrative interviews, participatory observation and in addition researcher's prior knowledge and understanding about the subject will affect to the study. Narrative interviews will be collected in May-July 2017. In the following, this methodological strategy and data collection of the study are presented.

I, researcher of the study, have many years of working history in group fitness business. I work as an entrepreneur in this business and research data will be collected in a group fitness studio, which

one I own. My prior knowledge and understanding about the context and phenomena will naturally shape this study.

### **3.2 Narrative interviews**

As the goal of this study is to explore customers' real life embodied experiences in group fitness context, narrative interviews (see e.g. Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016) are found as a suitable way for data collection. As service experience is seen individualistic and unique (Jaakkola et al. 2015), narratives give the interviewee a possibility to tell a story with their own voice, from their own point of view. The phenomenological approach will be stressed: the goal of the research is to study the service experience co-creation by focusing on how people interact with each other and with their environment in order to understand their culture (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). Narratives have been widely used in social science disciplines including sociology, anthropology, psychology and phenomenology. In the field of business research narratives have been used in organizational and management studies, but research related to service experience or co-creation has not utilized this approach by far.

Narrative research sees people as active social beings and focuses attention on the way personal and cultural realities are constructed through narrative and storytelling (Sparkes, 2005, p. 191). Hence, in this paper, narrative will refer to a) the perspectives and experiences expressed as stories and (b) the research method seeking themes and patterns of meaning from the analysis of interview data. The narrative interviews will be taped with the participants' consent and transcribed for closer analysis. In this study narratives will give a context to view embodied customer experience and its relation to the concept of co-creation.

### **3.3 Analysis of the data**

There are various ways to analyze the narrative data. One of the most popular ways for narrative analysis is the distinction to "analysis of narratives" and "narrative analysis" (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative analysis creates a totally new narrative based on the research data. The result of the analysis can be for example a narrative description about some specific life situation, whole life story or other case. Researcher utilizing narrative analysis aims to create a narrative with temporal structure, which ends to the final conclusion (Polkinghorne, 1995). The analysis of narratives instead can be implemented as thematizing and classification of situations, characters and experiences. This type of analysis aims to construct general observations from the data. Analysis of narratives requires more stories under the observation than narrative analysis.

This research utilizes the analysis of narratives as the basis of analyzing the research data. It is a suitable way to analyze the data as the goal is to find different kinds of customer types in group fitness based on how individuals are constructing their embodied service experiences. Analysis of narratives will be focused on meaning and content of the narrative (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016).

### **3.4 Ethics of the study**

This research has an interesting design and using narratives as a tool to gather the research data brings fresh and novel approaches to the field of sport and fitness research (Baker, Zhou, Pizzo, Du and Funk, 2017) as well as to the research field of service experience management. However, design has

its' challenges and ethical issues need to be well considered. Research is following the good ethical practice: honesty, integrity and accuracy will be guiding lines throughout the research process.

In ethnography, researcher is also the research instrument (Punch, 1994) and has a pivotal role to play in determining both how the fieldwork develops and the resultant form of the data. Ethnographic research requires paying extra attention to the decisions made in research process (Dewalt, Dewalt & Wayland 1998, 273; Vanderstaay, 2005). As I am studying a phenomena, from which I have strong prior-knowledge and understanding, I need to be well aware of my position throughout the study.

Considering the narrative interviews made in group fitness studio, the principle of voluntary participation is naturally important (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016, 71): people will be asked to participate to research voluntarily. In addition, prospective research participants must be fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in research must give their consent to participate. The written consent will be the basis of participation.

Ethnographic research calls for special attention on researcher-participant relationships as researcher does a lot of fieldwork among the research objects and builds trust and relationships with them (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). There are several special requirements for researcher that arise due the extended and often quite complex dealing with researched that safeguard the position of research subjects and these occur especially in ethnographic research (Schwandt, 2001). In this research this is especially important issue, as researcher is familiar to the interviewees as an entrepreneur and instructor of group fitness classes. How to create an atmosphere, where people are willing to tell me their opinions and about their experiences in honest and natural way? There is possibility that they leave something not to be said for example for these reasons: they think that researcher already knows what they are thinking or they are afraid to say their own, honest opinion to researcher. To narrow this gap narratives can be considered to be a suitable way to gather the data as interviewees are telling their own stories with their own voice and researcher's possibility to guide the interview is loose.

The privacy of research participants needs also to be taken care. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) stress that the respect for privacy and protection of personal data are basic features of responsibility towards the research subjects. The confidentiality is guaranteed for all participants: identifying information will not be available to anyone who is not directly involved in the study. The identity of participants will be anonymized in the research so they can not be identified by anyone. The identities and research records of participants of the research will be kept confidential. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Participants can access to the materials concerning them and nothing will be published. without their permission. All data will also be stored in a way no unauthorized access is possible.

#### **4 Contribution**

Study offers various managerial implications. Analysis provides deeper understanding of complex phenomena of service experience and its' co-creation. The analysis helps service providers to identify relevant customer types for their firm, so they can manage and design their services to encounter the needs and expectations of different customer types more precisely. Service providers can get insight to realize, what are the critical elements in their service ecosystem in which to focus

and invest in. Focusing on the right attributes can increase the satisfaction and loyalty of existing customers and attracting new customers, fitting to the firm's desired customer types. All in all, being able to identify the key customer types and offering them superior service experiences enhance also firm's competitive advantage.

From theoretical perspective, this research offers fruitful contributions. Service business has gone through radical changes during last decades, which has shaken the ways service providers are producing their services and managing customers' experiences. At the same time also customers' and other stakeholders' ways to consume services change. Still, for example despite of digitalization there are still a lot of firms in the field, which are offering their services in direct interaction with customers and other actors. Customer's experience is developing and revolutionizing in these firm and this in-firm context should not be forgotten. This study highlights this phenomena and raises in-firm service experience and its' co-creation in to the spotlight, for a reason. Research captures the essence of complex phenomena of service experience co-creation in group fitness context, The research around co-creation of service experience is still quite limited and its' examination in in-firm context opens new perspectives. Group fitness context gives also an opportunity to explore the phenomena from the perspective of customer's embodied service experience, which creates quite an unique setting to explore. Research explores people's real life experiences and distinguishes different kind of customer types based on respondents' narratives. Finding important factors from quite complex service ecosystem affecting strongly to customer's total experience gives new understanding about customer's service experience and its' formation. As people's experiences are mediated by language and developed through a process of cultural construction, narrative research is suitable to explore them (Riesmann 2008). Narrative research can be described as activities involved in generating, analysing and re-presenting stories of life experiences (Clandinin, 2013). Although narrative research has gained popularity within the field of sport, narrative research around fitness is still quite limited.

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