

# RESEARCH SUMMARY

## Virtual Technology & the Customer Experience: A Breast Augmentation Context 2019

### Research Aim

To explore the breast augmentation service through a customer experience lens, with specific consideration to the role of 3D imaging software, to better understand how patients expect to receive a service and the role of 3D imaging technology in potentially shaping expected outcomes and post-operative perceptions.

### Background

- Customer experience is key to service design. However, current literature lacks application to transformative services such as medical & cosmetic surgery.
- In breast augmentation, there are rising rates of dissatisfaction with technically successful surgical outcomes, and re-operation rates continue to increase (Cash, Dual & Perkins, 2002; Phillips, 2017).
- Motivated by a drive for femininity, improved self-esteem, and social acceptance, there is volatility in the physical and psychological wellbeing of these consumers (Solvi et al, 2010; Walden, 2010). This trend evidences a dissonance between expectations of the breast augmentation service, and subsequent perceptions.
- The role of virtual technology in enhancing the service experience has been widely acknowledged in fields such as fashion retailing, e-commerce and tourism.
- While the literature considers the role of 3D breast imaging as an aid in the customer experience and evaluates the breast simulation accuracy, there is little understanding of how and whether 3D breast imaging can bring the imagined goal closer to the reality to improve the customer experience.

### Literature and Theory

- **Gentile's Customer Experience Framework (2006):** contributes a holistic approach to the customer experience literature, proposing that the customer experience is a multi-dimensional structure composed of six elementary components (sensorial, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle and relational).
- **Pusic et al's "Breast Q" (2009):** assesses the impact and effectiveness of breast surgery from a customer's perspective to reflect the entirety of the patient experience. The framework has six domains (satisfaction with breasts, overall outcome, process of care, physical wellbeing, psychosocial wellbeing, and sexual wellbeing).
- **Holsapple & Wu's Hedonic framework of virtual acceptance (2009):** serves to analyse virtual experiences such as 3D simulation. The framework considers engagement with a virtual world as a function of imaginal (role projection, fantasy, escapism) and emotional (emotional involvement, arousal, enjoyment) responses.

### Method

This research reports findings of qualitative, semi-structured, longitudinal interviews with 14 patients of a metropolitan breast surgery clinic. The interviews were conducted both before and six weeks after surgery (28 interviews), with half the sample electing to undergo 3D breast imaging and half receiving the standard service (no imaging). Through analysis of the both the first and second interview data, the role of 3D imaging was investigated.



## Findings

- Within the breast augmentation context, there is an inherent issue of dissonance between patient expectations and perceived surgical outcomes, with aesthetic based re-operation rates at an all-time high
- External sources of information were identified as the foundation of the imagined experience for participants, with organisational touch points considered as a supplementary resource
- The research revealed a distinctive shift in the imagined experience for patients from abstract and emotional to concrete and cognitive (fantasy to fact).
- In the imagined experience for the participants, there was a reappraisal of emotions to focus on the cognitive dimension of the customer experience.
- There is a strong link between participants citing extensive information search and the subsequent preference to undergo the 3D imaging service.
- A key role of 3D imaging in the actual customer experience is to provide peace-of-mind to patients post-operatively.
- The research suggests that there is a conflict between dimensions of Holsapple & Wu's (2006) hedonic framework of virtual acceptance.
- The research highlights the role of 3D imaging as being part of a package that involves numerous touchpoints to facilitate an optimal customer experience.

## Contributions and Implications

### Theoretical Contributions:

1. **The imagined customer experience is shaped by external information:** This research found that external sources of information are prioritised over organisational touch points in the formation of the imagined patient experience. As a result, there are considerable inconsistencies in the delivery and receipt of organisational touch points.
2. **The customer experience is dynamic and evolves:** As customers travel along the customer journey, tangibility increases and the role of emotions weakens, while the cognitive dimension of customer experience takes the foreground.
3. **3D imaging is part of an informed search strategy:** This research provides a clear link between a highly-involved patient and the likelihood of adopting 3D imaging as part of the service experience.
4. **3D imaging leverages imaginal responses to create peace-of-mind:** This research contributes a new perspective to Holsapple & Wu's (2006) framework that considers the dimensions to be dynamic and hierarchical, as opposed to synergistic.

### Managerial/Practical Contributions:

Practitioners should:

1. **Develop comprehensive resources to reduce information asymmetry**
2. **Tailor the service to the evolution of the customer experience**
3. **Incorporate 3D imaging into the core service**
4. **Implement a second 'sizing' consultation to the customer experience (including 3D imaging)**