

Enhancing Event Quality Through Mystery Shopping: Integrating Theoretical and Practical Perspectives

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Abstract: While the SERVQUAL model by Parasuraman et al. (1988) provides a robust framework for assessing service quality through dimensions such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, its practical application to live events remains underexplored. Pine and Gilmore's (1998) concept of the "experience economy" underscores the importance of creating memorable customer experiences. However, traditional methods often fail to capture detailed and objective insights. Deming's (2000) Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle emphasises continuous improvement, aligning well with the mystery shopping method, which offers actionable feedback in refining event planning and execution for this case. However, there is a lack of research on how mystery shopping can be systematically applied to evaluate and enhance live event experiences. Furthermore, while Kotler et al. (2016) highlight the importance of effective customer feedback mechanisms, there is a gap in understanding how mystery shopping can provide granular insights from initial contact to post-event follow-up, thereby supporting continuous improvement and addressing SERVQUAL dimensions. Solomon (2019) stresses the need to understand consumer behaviour, particularly given the significant financial and emotional investments involved in events. Nevertheless, there is limited research on how real-time observations of behaviour and interactions, as captured through mystery shopping, can be utilised to improve the event experience. This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring how student engagement and cooperation in the mystery shopping process can enhance the evaluation and quality of live events across all phases of the customer journey. The research followed a structured methodology based on Morrison et al. (1997) and Curri-Mehmeti (2020), starting with brainstorming and defining the objectives of the mystery shopping experiment in April 2024. The study evaluated events from the customer journey perspective, covering pre-event, arrival, during-event, and post-event phases. Specific evaluation criteria were developed, and a Webropol online survey with 28 questions, including 12 open-ended ones, was used to gather detailed feedback. Six voluntary participants from LAB University of Applied Sciences were recruited and trained as mystery shoppers. They evaluated various events in South Karelia, providing insights into service quality, customer experience, and operational efficiency. The data collection spanned from June to August 2024, with students submitting evaluations and photos to verify their attendance. This methodology ensured comprehensive and actionable feedback for event organisers while offering students practical learning opportunities. Findings indicate that mystery shopping yields objective feedback on customer experiences, guiding strategic decisions and enhancing training. It identifies behaviours affecting customer satisfaction and promotes continuous improvement. Using technology can further enhance feedback accuracy. This study shows that mystery shopping is an effective tool for evaluating and improving event service quality, offering actionable insights for organisers and enriching students' learning experiences by linking theory with real-world applications.

Keywords: Service quality, Customer experience, Mystery shopping, Event management, Student engagement

1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction and service quality are vital in determining an event's success. However, conventional assessment approaches lack thorough and unbiased evaluation. The SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) outlines important service components but has limited use in live events. Additionally, Deming's PDCA cycle incorporates principles of continuous improvement, while Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy exerts the importance of having an unforgettable customer interaction. As Kotler et al. (2016) argue, mystery shopping captures minute details, provides feedback in real-time and helps cover gaps in marketing, services offered, and programs undertaken, thus improving the overall experience. It also aids in understanding consumer behaviour (Solomon, 2019). By looking through these lenses, event professionals can sequentially appreciate the event experience from the points of all attendees and improve how the experience is created and fostered.

This research explores *how student engagement and cooperation can enhance the evaluation and quality of live events by addressing every phase of the customer journey: pre-event, arrival, during-event, and post-event*. The study collects insights on service quality, customer experience, and operational efficiency using the mystery shopping method by analysing respondents' backgrounds, preconceptions, and direct interactions during these phases. By investigating the mystery shopping process, the research identifies gaps in event marketing, infrastructure, and service delivery while examining how respondent demographics, pre-event expectations, arrival logistics, and during-event experiences influence overall satisfaction and post-event reflections. The aim

is to generate actionable recommendations for event organisers and assess the feasibility and effectiveness of utilising students as evaluators.

Incorporating the SERVQUAL model within the mystery shopping exercise illustrates an application of theory through practical, hands-on learning. Students learn to skillfully resolve business problems and evaluate service quality through observational analysis, critical thinking, and customer interaction analysis. Moreover, they assess the demographic and event preference responses to structure the analysis within the context of consumer behaviour, increasing engagement, knowledge retention, and professional skill acquisition. The research gives the event organisers practical measures for enhancing service quality and customer satisfaction. Moreover, the procedure is particularly beneficial for improving the academic and practical implications of the mystery shopping process.

2. Customer Journey in Events

The event customer journey encompasses the entire attendee experience, from awareness and registration to post-event follow-up. Optimising this journey is key to enhancing satisfaction and loyalty, making it a shared responsibility for event organisers. A deeper understanding fosters commitment to improving each touchpoint for a better overall experience.

Pre-Event Phase

The pre-event phase shapes the attendee experience, covering interactions before the event. Key elements include marketing, registration, and pre-event communication, all crucial for setting the right expectations and engagement. Effective marketing strategies are essential to attract potential attendees. Research by Hollebeek et al. (2019) suggests that personalised marketing and targeted promotions significantly enhance attendee engagement. The registration process should be seamless and user-friendly, as complex or time-consuming registration processes can deter potential attendees (Wong et al., 2019). Pre-event communications, such as emails and social media updates, help build anticipation and provide necessary information to attendees (Bladen et al., 2022).

During-Event Phase

The during-event phase is the core of the attendee experience, covering entry, navigation, engagement, and interactions. It directly impacts satisfaction as the event's value is delivered, making it crucial for organisers to manage effectively. Entry and navigation should be well-organized to ensure a smooth flow of attendees. Signage and assistance from event staff are critical for helping attendees navigate the venue (Bladen et al., 2022). Engagement with activities and sessions forms the core of the event experience. Various engaging and relevant activities ensure that attendees find value in their participation (Getz & Page, 2019). Staff interactions also play a significant role; friendly and knowledgeable staff can enhance the overall experience (Grissmann et al., 2013).

Post-Event Phase

The post-event phase includes follow-up communications and feedback collection. Effective follow-up can reinforce positive experiences and address any issues that may have arisen. Follow-up communications should thank attendees for participating and provide information on future events (Bladen et al., 2022). Collecting feedback through surveys helps organisers understand what worked well and what needs improvement. According to Lovelock and Patterson (2015), timely feedback collection and addressing concerns promptly can significantly enhance future attendee satisfaction.

3. Mystery Shopping

Definition and relevance

Mystery shopping is often used in retail and hospitality to evaluate service quality from the customer's viewpoint (Wilson, 1998). It helps organisations pinpoint areas where they excel and improve upon their shortcomings. Over time, methodologies changed to enhance the precision and dependability of the data (Finn & Kayande, 1999; Curri-Mehmeti, 2020). The method gives objective assessments, helps train staff, and enhances the ethic of continuous improvement and responsibility (Wiele et al., 2005; Wilson, 1998; Woodside et al., 2020). These techniques also help inform strategic choices by spotting trends in customer behaviours that are extremely important in competitive markets (Morrison et al., 1997). Videotaping and reporting in real-time are modern techniques that increase feedback accuracy (Zhao & Di Benedetto, 2013). Moreover, telephone and web

mystery shopping are essential tools for analysing the quality of digital services, particularly for assessing the site's response time and functionality (Finn & Kayande, 1999; Morrison et al., 1997; Strähle, 2013).

Methods of Mystery Shopping

The approaches to mystery shopping differ based on the research objectives and the type of business. Mystery shoppers traditionally conduct direct observations of people through in-person visits where employees are engaged, surroundings are checked, and the quality of service is rated (Wilson, 1998). Such visits may be structured, where checklist guidance is there for consistency or unstructured (Minghetti & Celotto, 2014). Mystery shopping is used to study various activities, including service delivery, employee training, and the customer journey (Wilson, 2001; Allison et al., 2010; Halvorsrud et al., 2016). It enables an anthropologist to study people in their natural environment (Allison et al., 2010). Such designs are supplemented with SERVQUAL, or Deming’s PDCA cycle, which restates the importance of cannot be overstated in continuously enhancing the experience that customers receive (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Deming, 2000; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Mystery shopping is also critical in evaluating the service quality during the various stages of events.

It consists of several defined and precise steps to collect reliable, accurate, and valid information on the customer journey (Table 1). The program about the mystery shopping process starts with an important step of program design where the objectives are set to satisfy some business issues like assessing the quality of customer service, carrying out compliance checks, or ascertaining the level of training (Wilson, 2017). These objectives' comprehensive and measurable evaluation criteria include customers’ greetings, product understanding, and even response time (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

The recruitment and training of mystery shoppers are fundamental to ensuring reliable evaluations. These individuals, representing typical customers, undergo training to observe and report objectively, maintaining consistency in assessments (Minghetti & Celotto, 2014). During visits, mystery shoppers follow a structured methodology, interacting anonymously to provide unbiased evaluations (Brito & Rambocas, 2016). Afterwards, they submit detailed reports, analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods to identify patterns and areas for improvement (Jacob et al., 2018).

Findings are compiled into comprehensive reports with actionable recommendations, helping businesses enhance service quality, staff training, and customer satisfaction (Morrison et al., 1997; Curri-Mehmeti, 2020).

Table 1: Steps in Mystery Shopping (Morrison et al., 1997; Curri-Mehmeti, 2020)

Designing the Mystery Shopping Program	The first step in the mystery shopping process is designing the program. This involves defining the objectives of the mystery shopping exercise, which could range from evaluating customer service and measuring compliance with company standards to identifying training needs (Wilson, 2001). Clear objectives ensure the mystery shopping program is tailored to meet business needs.
Developing Evaluation Criteria	Based on the objectives, specific evaluation criteria are developed. These criteria typically include aspects of service quality such as greeting customers, product knowledge, response times, and overall customer interaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The criteria should be comprehensive, measurable, and aligned with the company's service standards.
Recruiting and Training Mystery Shoppers	Recruiting and training mystery shoppers is crucial for the success of the program. Mystery shoppers should represent the typical customer demographic and be trained to observe and report objectively. Training ensures shoppers understand the evaluation criteria and are consistent in their assessments (Minghetti & Celotto, 2014).
Conducting Mystery Shopping Visits	Mystery shoppers carry out their assignments according to the predefined methodology. They visit, call, or interact with the business as typical customers, carefully noting their experiences and observations. The methodology ensures that the visits are conducted anonymously and without bias (Brito & Rambocas, 2016).
Data Collection and Analysis	After completing their assignments, mystery shoppers submit detailed reports based on their experiences. These reports are collected and analysed to identify patterns, strengths, and areas for improvement. Data analysis may involve quantitative methods, such as scoring and statistical analysis, and qualitative methods, such as thematic analysis of written feedback (Lim et al., 2023).
Reporting and Action Planning	The final step involves compiling the findings into a comprehensive report. The report should highlight key insights, trends, and actionable recommendations. Businesses use these insights to develop action plans to improve service quality, train staff, and enhance customer satisfaction (Morrison et al., 1997).

However, the effectiveness of mystery shopping depends on the rigour and objectivity of the methodology employed. Critics argue that mystery shopping can sometimes produce biased or unrepresentative results if the mystery shoppers' interactions are not typical of regular customer experiences (Wilson, 1998). To mitigate this

risk, it is crucial to ensure that mystery shoppers are well-trained and that the evaluation criteria are comprehensive and aligned with the business's service standards (Finn & Kayande, 1999; Wiele et al., 2005).

4. Research Methodology

This research employed a predominantly quantitative approach, incorporating some qualitative elements through open-ended questions and following the steps in Table 1 by Morrison et al. (1997) and Curri-Mehmeti (2020). The process started in April 2024 by brainstorming and defining the mystery shopping experiment's objectives and discussing its implementation (e.g. Morrison et al., 1997; Wilson, 1998).

The next step involved deciding the focal points of the study and developing specific evaluation criteria (e.g. Wilson, 1998; Morrison et al., 1997). This research aimed to study events from the customer journey perspective, starting from the information search and proceeding to the visit to the event and using services there. After the visit, the aftermath experiences and feedback issues were also analysed. These points were designed to gather feedback on the overall experience, including the quality of service, the customer's likelihood to recommend the event, and any suggestions for improvement. The study utilised a single instrument, a Webropol online survey, which included 28 questions—12 of which were open-ended—covering the pre-event, arrival, during-event, and post-event phases. (Table 2). Data coding was performed manually, with measures in place to ensure consistency. Responses were categorised and analysed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and insights. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to summarise the findings.

Table 2: Customer journey in the questionnaire

Respondent information	GDPR consent	These aimed to understand how the respondent's background might affect his/her answers and perception.
	Email address	
	Age	
	Gender	
	Field of Study	
	What kind of events do you most often participate in?	
	How often do you usually attend events with an entrance fee in a year?	
Background information	Which event are you going to evaluate?	Pre-experiences ' in this paper meant any previous experiences the respondent might have had with similar events or services. These experiences could influence their expectations, perceptions, and feedback.
	When are you going to the event?	
	Have you been to a similar kind of event earlier?	
	Evaluate the themes influencing your decision to attend an event.	
Before event	Where can you find information about the event online?	This part concentrated on online mystery shopping to see whether there is enough information online and how the information online affects the expectations.
	Evaluate the website (if the event has one)	
	Open feedback	
	Do you think the information and communication about the event were sufficient?	
	What expectations or perceptions did the event's marketing develop in you?	
Arriving at the event	What time did you arrive at the event?	These questions figured out the infrastructure, public transportation, parking possibilities, and guidance for the event, which all affect the visitor's experience and the mood in which they enter the event.
	What is the weather like in the event?	
	Did you come to the event alone or with someone?	
	How was the journey to the event?	
	Describe your first encounters or feelings upon arriving at the event area.	
During event	Evaluate the following factors in the event.	
	Open feedback	

	Ask for help from a staff member at the event. Describe briefly the encounter and the task. How would you evaluate the interaction with the staff member?	With these questions, respondents provided information about the event itself and the customer service.
After event	Was there a feedback survey, or is there a possibility of offering feedback to the organisers?	These questions helped to understand if events gather any feedback and, on the other hand, encouraged respondents to reflect on their experience afterwards.
	What do you think about the event after visiting?	
	Did the event meet your expectations?	
	What were the strengths and weaknesses of the event?	
	To whom would you recommend this event?	
	Attach two pictures (or more) of the event that could illustrate your evaluation.	
Pedagogical and professional	To whom would you recommend this event?	The last part gathered information about the experiment and encouraged respondents to consider how they can use mystery shopping and its learnings in their future lives.
	What kind of feedback would you give us to develop the mystery shopping concept?	

Convenience sampling was used to recruit six voluntary participants from the LAB University of Applied Sciences. These students were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate rather than representing the entire student body of nearly 10,000. Since this was the pilot study for future actions, it was considered that the selection of six students justified the study's scope. The chosen students had diverse international backgrounds, with half residing in the same area where the events occurred.

Table 3: Respondents

Respondent nr	Gender	Age	Study program	Event
R1	Female	19	Tourism	Imatra Big Band Festival
R2	Non-binary	24	Design	Black and White International Theatre Festival
R3	Female	25	Design	Black and White International Theatre Festival
R4	Female	23	Design	Kumaus Festival
R5	Male	**	Business	Vallijamit Music Festival
R6	Female	29	Business	Lappeenranta Wine Festival

The chosen ones were trained and informed of their duties. Students could choose their event among five options organised in South Karelia: Imatra Big Band, Vallijamit Music Festival, Kumaus Festival, and Lappeenranta Wine Festival. Also, the Black and White International Theatre Festival was on the list, but unfortunately, the students cancelled their attendance. However, these two participants did the pre-study of the event and are thus included as respondents. The aim was that the chosen events would represent both big and small events around South Karelia. Also, the Webropol questionnaire was introduced and explained. Besides answering the questions, the students were asked to send at least two pictures from the event to prove their presence at the event. The students could get compensated for the entrance fee after finishing the evaluation. The data from the event were collected between June 2024 and August 2024.

5. Findings

Before event

Information availability significantly influenced attendees' expectations, with experiences varying across events. Respondents accessed event websites and social media, with some also relying on local event calendars and municipal sites. However, the sufficiency of information was inconsistent. A participant evaluating the Kumaus Festival noted, "The websites are visually appealing but lack essential details like contact information and clear schedules" (R4). Similarly, a Black and White International Theatre Festival respondent stated, "I found it difficult to locate public transport guidance, which would have been helpful" (R2). The absence of English-language content was a barrier for international participants at the Lappeenranta Wine Festival: "The lack of English translations made it hard for me to understand the event details" (R4) entirely.

Arriving at the Event

Arrival experiences varied widely depending on the event. At the Imatra Big Band Festival, one respondent shared, "The first impression of the venue was great; staff were friendly, and the directions were clear" (R1). However, logistical challenges were noted at other events, such as unclear signage and ticketing issues at the Black and White International Theatre Festival: "I could not buy a ticket to the festival because of unclear signage and instructions" (R2). These differences highlight the importance of tailored arrival planning to meet attendee needs. Solomon (2019) emphasises understanding consumer behaviour, noting that events involve significant financial and emotional investments. Mystery shopping captures real-time observations of behaviour and interactions, offering valuable data to improve the event experience.

During the Event

Safety and cleanliness were praised across all events, though the quality of interactions and programming varied. At the Lappeenranta Wine Festival, a respondent commented, "The staff were friendly but did not seem well-informed when I asked about recycling points" (R6). By contrast, an Imatra Big Band Festival respondent reflected, "Engaging activities made the event enjoyable and met most of my expectations" (R1). Some events faced challenges in aligning programming with attendee expectations. For example, a participant at the Kumaus Festival remarked, "I expected more variety in the programming; the activities were too limited" (R4). Combining all previously mentioned perspectives enables event organisers to effectively manage and enhance the customer journey, ensuring every touchpoint contributes to a positive and memorable experience.

After the Event

The approach to feedback collection differed significantly across events. Some events provided formal surveys, while others lacked structured mechanisms for gathering attendee impressions. A Black and White International Theatre Festival participant remarked, "It is good that there was a survey to answer, but more structured questions on logistics would help" (R2). Additionally, weather and logistical issues impacted overall impressions; a respondent at the Lappeenranta Wine Festival noted, "Despite the bad weather, the event was well-organized, but a post-event email with highlights or plans would have been appreciated" (R6).

Pedagogical Perspective

Students' learning experiences were enriched by the diversity of events they evaluated, each offering unique insights. For instance, a participant evaluating the Kumaus Festival reflected, "I liked this experience a lot; it made me focus on details I would have overlooked otherwise" (R4). At the Imatra Big Band Festival, a respondent shared, "Evaluating the event taught me how to consider both operational and customer satisfaction aspects, which will be useful in my career" (R1). These experiences gave students critical thinking and analytical skills while deepening their understanding of event management and customer engagement.

6. Conclusions and Future Research

This study addressed the research question: *How can student engagement and cooperation be used to evaluate and enhance the quality of live events across the customer journey?* The purpose was to explore the effectiveness of mystery shopping as a tool for assessing service quality, customer experience, and operational efficiency while providing educational benefits for students. By integrating theoretical frameworks with practical applications, the study sought to generate actionable insights for event organisers and deepen student learning.

This study underscores the value of mystery shopping as a tool for evaluating and enhancing service quality in event management. Integrating academic frameworks, such as SERVQUAL, the experience economy, and PDCA, with practical applications highlights the mutual benefits for event organisers and students. Despite its limitations, the research offers actionable insights for improving the customer journey, fostering innovation, and advancing educational practices. As the industry evolves, mystery shopping will remain a versatile method for bridging theoretical knowledge and real-world application.

Theoretical Contribution

The study significantly contributes to understanding how theoretical frameworks can inform and improve event management practices. The SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) provided a foundation for identifying deficiencies in service dimensions, such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, highlighted in the mystery shopping evaluations. These insights reinforce the model's relevance for assessing customer service in live event settings.

Pine and Gilmore's (1998) "experience economy" framework underpinned the analysis of event programming and attendee engagement, emphasising the importance of creating memorable experiences. Events that aligned their activities with audience expectations were more successful in delivering these experiences, validating the framework's emphasis on value-driven customer interactions.

Deming's (2000) PDCA cycle informed the iterative improvement process by highlighting the role of structured feedback mechanisms in refining event planning and execution. This aligns with Kotler et al.'s (2016) emphasis on effective feedback systems, underscoring mystery shopping as a critical tool for continuous improvement. Solomon's (2019) perspective on consumer behaviour further complemented the analysis by providing insights into how customer expectations and emotional investments influence overall satisfaction.

Managerial Implications

Mystery shopping proved an effective method for capturing detailed insights across all customer journey phases. Pre-event communication, on-site navigation, and post-event engagement emerged as critical areas for improvement, consistent with Bladen et al. (2022). This information helps events actively address service delivery gaps, such as improving staff training and ensuring the consistency of event programming.

Integrating logistical feedback, such as the accessibility of recycling points, aligns with broader sustainability goals highlighted in Getz and Page (2019). Mystery shopping offers a cost-effective alternative to traditional feedback mechanisms by providing detailed, actionable insights. Additionally, incorporating students as mystery shoppers reduces costs and fosters collaboration between academia and industry, equipping students with practical observational analysis and customer evaluation skills.

Also, mystery shopping proved beneficial in bridging theoretical learning with practical application. Students gained hands-on experience by applying frameworks such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988), Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy, and Deming's (2000) PDCA cycle to real-world evaluation, developing their observational analysis, critical thinking, and customer interaction assessment. Students appreciated the opportunity to reflect on operational details and customer satisfaction, which enhanced their understanding of service quality across different customer journey phases. This also provided value in active learning, aligning with Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), and highlighted how practical assignments like mystery shopping can foster deeper engagement and professional readiness.

Evaluation of the Study

This study successfully combined theoretical models and practical applications, demonstrating the value of mystery shopping for event evaluation and student learning. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the study to include a more extensive and diverse set of events would enhance its scope. The reliance on students as evaluators introduced potential biases, as their interpretations and expectations may differ from those of typical attendees despite training designed to standardise evaluations. Additionally, the study did not assess the long-term impact of mystery shopping feedback on event quality, leaving a gap in understanding its sustained effects.

Future Research

Future research could build on this study by including diverse event types, such as virtual and hybrid formats, to explore how mystery shopping adapts to different contexts. Technological advancements, including mobile applications and AI-based analytics (Zhao & Di Benedetto, 2013), could further enhance the accuracy and immediacy of evaluations. Longitudinal studies would help assess the lasting effects of mystery shopping feedback on event quality and customer loyalty. Comparative analyses with other feedback mechanisms, such as traditional surveys or focus groups, could provide additional insights into the relative strengths and weaknesses of mystery shopping.

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