

THE EXPERIENCE THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF TOURISM RESEARCH

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Abstract: *The tourism sector is undoubtedly subject to the fundamental changes in the experience economy. Innovative experience design is becoming an increasingly important component of tourism firm's core capabilities. Satisfaction and quality are no longer adequate descriptors of tourism consumption. Competitive businesses in tourism rather create conditions that facilitate the realization of positive memorable tourism experiences. Experiences are the new standard to deliver to customers. However, the concept of experience design is a rather new and somewhat undiscovered concept, both in theory and practice, within tourism as well as in other disciplines. Experience design is a broader concept than experience production. It captures the idea that experiences are more than a product to be produced that they involve the strategic development of a context. In this paper, based on the experience theory developments in the field of tourism research, we will seek to broaden our comprehension of what constitutes a commercial experience in tourism, of how and by whom it can be profitably designed and to investigate measurement measures identified by empirical studies. The main objective of the present study is to offer a detailed critical review of two frameworks we have considered relevant in explaining and operationalizing the experience construct in tourism industry contexts.*

Keywords: *conceptual models of tourist experience, measurement of memorable tourist experiences*

INTRODUCTION

The commercial experience concept is closely related to tourism both in its origins and its implications. Pine and Gilmore (1999) introduced the concept¹ in economic research with the assertion that the developed world was moving from a service- to an experience-based economy. They have made their observation partly based on an analysis of the growth of US leisure and tourism attractions, such as theme parks, concerts, cinema and sports events, which they found to outperform other sectors in terms of price, employment and nominal gross domestic product. Their explanation was that these businesses all offered experiences which were valued because they were unique, memorable and engaged the individual in a personal way. Services, in contrast, were becoming

1 Although the concept has been employed for the first time in marketing research by Holbrook and Hirschman in the 1980ies for the interpretation of experiential consumption, Pine and Gilmore were the ones who, a decade later, brought it to the fore of academic research and presented experiences as the new economic offering.

commodities in the sense that consumers regarded them as homogeneous and purchased them solely on price and availability.

The continuous development of the experience construct (Pralhalad and Venkatram, 2004; Boswijk et al., 2007) is essential particularly in the tourism arena, where the role of the customer (tourist) is central. The importance acknowledged by academics in tourism research to the tourist experience concept is reflected by a wide range of studies published in journals, books and working papers (Aho, 2001; Larsen et al., 2008; Kjær Mansfeldt et al., 2008; Edwards et al., 2009; [Hosany](#) and [Gilbert](#), 2009; Murray et al., 2010; Sheng and Chen, 2013). Based on the critical literature review, the main purposes of our present study are, on the one hand, to clarify the nature and main characteristics of memorable experiences in tourism and, on the other hand, to analyze an existing measurement scale of the experience construct.

The construct of commercial experience has been widely adopted in economical research since the seminal work of Pine and Gilmore (1999) which created a model delineating four realms of consumer experience: educational, escapist, esthetic, and entertainment experiences, which they coined the *4Es*². These dimensions vary based on the customer's active or passive participation and on his/her absorption or immersion in the experience (Figure 1).

Pine and Gilmore's conceptualization is however the reflection of the economic realities at the time of publication of their work (1999). Their approach to experience production (or *staging*) reflects a logic that takes the company as starting point, where stories are told, attention sought and experiences directed from the business and supplier side, leaving the consumer passive. Thus companies still hold the power of consumption and dictate commercial values, what the customers can buy and will experience and – to a great extent – customers are seen as one homogenous market.

The recent development of the experience economy since then (Pralhalad and Venkatram, 2004; Boswijk et al., 2007; Larsen et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2010; Kjær Mansfeldt et al., 2008) can be considered a manifestation of the evolving role of the consumer – from a passive, isolated and unaware partaker to an active, connected and informed participant in the relationship with companies.

THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

Building upon Pine and Gilmore's seminal work (1999) and their concept of experience economy, Larsen et al (2008) propose a four-dimensional conceptual model of tourist experience design.

² The authors asserted that the four realms of experiences are valid in assessing tourist experiences as well.

Using the meanings of experience and design, both as nouns and verbs, they conceptualized four definitions of experience design. The four definitions do not just unravel different aspects of the tourist's experiences, but also point towards different notions on the nature of relation between consumers and producers of experiences.

As a noun, Larsen et al. (2008) define experience as the observation and spatial participation in an event. In their opinion, in this context, experience equals entertainment. Experience design as the physical arrangement of an event is designed for the tourist and defined in space and time (D1 – *Controlled entertainment*): e.g. traditional visit in an art museum.

As a verb, the authors define experience as going through an emotional sensation. The experience as a verb includes here the anticipations of the event (before the event), the emotional sensations that results from living through the event (during the event) and the memories and the recollection once the event is completed (after the event). In this context, Larsen et al. (2008) equals experience with exploring. When experience design is to live through the physically formed event, including before and after the *intensive* part of the experience, the experience is designed by the tourists but defined in space and time (D2 – *Uncontrolled entertainment*): e.g. an interactive museum with lots of activities.

As a noun design is defined as the static form of something shaped out of some other thing. In Larsen's et al. vision (2008) design as such is producer-driven, something designed by others than consumers themselves. When experience design is the constant reshaping of the experience regarded as delimited in space and time, the experience is still designed for the tourist but undefined in space and time (D3 – *Controlled exploring*): e.g. guide books or tourist information centers.

As a verb, design means the constant delimitation or shaping in form. This definition connects to the verb experience and implies that the subject constantly changes his or her experience of the event, before, during and after the *intensive phase* of the process, the experience itself. D4 represents the purely individual experience; it depicts a framework for how the tourist shapes his or her emotional sensations and physical performances through the unfolding of the experience as a process stretching over time and space. The experience design of D4 is purely phenomenological and individual – and is as such out of reach for the production side of the experience. The *uncontrolled exploring* segment represents consumers with a more futuristic mindset about tourism, who want to explore and co-design their experiences and to stay off the beaten path (e.g. to go to a local neighbourhood).

Kjær Mansfeldt et al. (2008) used Larsen et al.'s model (2008) and the experience design perspective incorporated in it to segment tourists visiting 14

Nordic and Baltic cities³. The researchers asked the 5040 quested visitors of the 14 cities about what types of experiences they prefer⁴ – along a set of other questions connected to age, gender, length of stay, their reasons to go, where their inspiration to go came from, what they want to do while they are in the city, what image they have of the city.

The ambition of the study was to show that the psychographic and/or experience design segments give an understanding of the data in a different way than the demographic segments – and perhaps inspire to different actions and recommendations when it comes to marketing, branding and behavioral analysis within tourism.

Thus, the study presents in its final part different cases of innovative tourist products (concrete products identified by the tourist organizations investigated in all participating cities). They represent a broad spectre of experiential tourism products, from museums combining visual arts with culinary art (ARoS museum in Aarhus) to restaurants serving food in settings that resemble the theatre (Madaleine's Foodtheatre in Copenhagen), from amusement parks to theme trams, from guided walking tours to making one's own jewellery.

A rich body of research has emerged in recent years examining the dimensions of tourist experiences (Edwards et al., 2009; [Hosany](#) and [Gilbert](#), 2009; Murray et al., 2010; Park et al., 2010; Sheng and Chen, 2013), but we haven't identified many empirical studies validating the measurement scales. Among the few we mention Kim et al.'s (2012) study, in which the authors have developed and tested a measurement scale for memorable tourism experiences (MTE) (Table 1). The seven constructs identified are important components of the tourism experiences that are likely to affect a person's memory.

In order to successfully capture the components of tourism experiences that strongly affect individuals, Kim et al. (2012) started by reviewing the subjective nature⁵ of tourist experiences and previous research on the

3 Instead of answering who the tourists are (demographic approach) or what they want to do (psychographic approach), the experience design approach explores how different groups of tourists want to experience and design their experiences.

4 The tourists were asked to mark how they want to experience a city when travelling. Four different sets of statements were presented (two of which were used for segmentation: *to be entertained* vs. *to explore on your own*; *experiences designed by others* vs. *experiences designed by yourself*), and the respondents were invited to place a mark using a flexible scale from 1 to 100.

5 Despite different interpretations and conceptualizations, the commercial experience construct reveals some common dimensions across most of the studies, among which the most recurrent is the

underlying dimensions of the tourism experience. Their next step in identifying the components of tourism experiences consisted of cross-referencing the literature on memory and memorable experiences.

Table 1
Memorable tourism experience scale

Hedonism

Thrilled about having a new experience
Indulged in the activities
Really enjoyed this tourism experience
Exciting

Local culture

Good impressions about the local people
Closely experienced the local culture
Local people in a destination were friendly

Novelty

Once-in-a-lifetime experience
Unique
Different from previous experiences
Experienced something new

Refreshment

Liberating
Enjoyed sense of freedom
Refreshing
Revitalized

Meaningfulness

I did something meaningful.
I did something important
Learned about myself

Involvement

I visited a place where I really wanted to go
I enjoyed activities which I really wanted to do
I was interested in the main activities of this tourism experience

Knowledge

Exploratory
Knowledge
New culture

Source: Kim et al. (2012)

The third step in constructing the measurement instrument from MTE was a multi-staged development study. Combining items generated from two sources (an open-ended survey and the literature review), a total of 84 items were developed as a basis for measuring MTE. A jury of three experts reviewed the above set of 84 items to ensure content validity. As a result of this process, it was concluded that a total of 85 items best measured MTE.

The developed instrument was empirically evaluated using data obtained from U.S. college students at a large Midwestern university. The

personal dimension. This dimension is determined by the fact that an experience involves the consumer at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, etc.).

participants were first asked to recall MTE and to evaluate all 85 items on a 7-point Likert-type scale, on which 1 represented *I have not experienced at all* and 7 represented *I have experienced very much*.

To purify the scale, items that were poorly correlated ($r < .4$) with the total score were eliminated. This procedure resulted in 25 items, out of the original 78, being retained. The reliability of the 25-item scale is .91 – and thus accepted as high. EFA was then conducted on the retained 25 items using both orthogonal (VARIMAX) and oblique (OBLIMIN) rotation methods to identify the dimensionality of MTE. Hence, a final seven-factor model emerged, with the remaining 24 items accounting for 75.89% of the total variance (Table 1).

Possible limitations of this model consist in the fact that it hasn't considered enough situational and individual difference factors and none connected to the material base – that is to the physical space strategically planned and designed, as highlighted by the first model discussed in the present study.

CONCLUSIONS

In the present study we have offered a detailed analysis of two research models explaining and measuring the factors characterizing and determining valuable experiences. Both models extend Pine and Gilmore's vision (1999) with user-centered perspectives. According to these perspectives, to meet the expectations of active and informed consumers seeking memorable experiences, hospitality and tourism industries must actively involve these in designing and positioning their offerings.

The provision of an attractive value proposition for tourism enterprises is dependent on the tourist experience. Consequently, businesses need to engage with the reality of the tourist experience as perceived by the consumer.

The conceptualization efforts described in our literature review are certainly worthwhile and have advanced our understanding of the nature and characteristics of commercial experiences. Nevertheless, more in-depth research is required into understanding the nature of the experience construct and how it can be articulated. The conceptual configuration of tourism experiences remains particularly challenging. Moreover, the development of experience scales is essential for tourism managers in evaluating their performance in meeting and exceeding customer expectations.

As a future research direction, we propose the implementation of a field research for assessing urban tourist experiences in Timisoara, using the first model reviewed in this study for an experiential segmentation of tourists visiting Timisoara and the second model discussed for assessing the memorability of experiences lived by the distinct experiential consumer segments previously identified. Furthermore, we suggest the evaluation of these

experiences in their anticipation phase, as well as in their *intensive* (as Larsen et al., 2008 call it) and in their recollection stage (the post-experience phase).

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