

Extended Abstract

MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE DESIRES: GETTING INTO THE MIND OF THE LUXURY HOTEL CONSUMER TO THE YEAR 2020

The background to this research lies in the growing individual wealth within many societies, which has been a catalyst for the consumption of luxury goods, leisure and travel (Park, Reisinger, & Noh, 2010). Consumers today are more independent, better informed, discerning, global, and are presented with expanding leisure consumption options, many of which are pursued by individuals seeking experiences that replace the ordinary with the extraordinary (Scott, Laws, & Boksberger, 2009). Globalization, advances in technology and rising consumer affluence are key drivers of the ‘experience economy’ (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Furthermore, profound changes in travel behavior have been observed in terms of how tourists engage with destinations, attractions and hotels, while increasingly seeking meaningful and memorable experiences. To this end, the hospitality sector is a fertile stage for experiential development, and luxury hotels provide an ideal backdrop for consumption experiences and the ability to attract affluent consumers. The purpose of this study was to engage a sample of frequently staying luxury hotel guests in face-to-face semi-structured interviews, eliciting the types of luxury guest room experiences consumers desire between now and the year 2020. Employing a constructive perspective this study made use of Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) experience framework, which identified memorable experience themes belonging to five primary memorable experience generator categories. These were Services, Atmosphere, Culture, Technology, and Sensory related to the four experience dimensions (entertainment, aesthetics, education and escapism).

Increasingly, in both the conceptual and research literature, the term “experience” appears as diverse a field as design, architecture, gaming, human-computer interaction, education, retail, marketing, healthcare, tourism and leisure, where the common focus is centred around the role of the customer. Consequently, the notion of experience as an important component of consumption has become a key element in understanding consumer behaviour (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). In the field of Tourism, research shows that today’s producers need to recognize that experiences have become central to consumption activities (Abrahams, 1986; Arnould & Price, 1993; Bille, 2010; Binkhorst, 2006; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011; Yuan, 2009).

Nevertheless, empirical research specifically directed at experiences in the lodging sector, remains scant (Ferreira & Teixeira, 2013; Hemmington, 2007; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). This is remarkable because Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) review of US attractions, such as destination theme parks, live concerts and sporting events, found that tourism and leisure businesses out-performed traditional industry segments, showing higher sales and profits. They assert that the major attraction for consumers are unique and memorable experiences, which add additional value for both the consumer and the producer (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). An extensive review of the literature has uncovered that more in-depth research is required to fully understand customer experience needs and desires, especially in the context of the luxury hotel sector.

To gain deeper insights into experience-focused phenomena that involve human interactions, qualitative research techniques were used to collect data from consumers (guests) targeted purposefully based on the frequency of their stays. In fact, the majority of the consumers interviewed stayed an average of 100 days a year in luxury hotel accommodation across the Northern and Southern hemispheres. A purposely-designed, semi-structured interview schedule informed by the review of literature and guided by a conceptual experience framework, produced current and future memorable experience generators that could be linked to experience dimensions and the nature of the environmental (physical and virtual) relationships of consumer participation.

From the analysis of data obtained from the consumers, five primary memorable experience generator categories (Services, Atmosphere, Culture, Technology and Sensory) and their current and future memorable experience generator themes were identified. By applying Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) four realms of experience framework, emerging from this research was the order of importance placed on future experience dimensions, namely the Entertainment, Aesthetics, Escapism and Education realms. Noticeably, the research found that consumers expressed the view that their future experience desires related to entertainment and service-generated experience themes, and that

memorable experiences generated within the Entertainment realm would become even more important to consumers in the future.

The research also found that consumers valued memorable experiences that were personally relevant, meaningful, contain humanistic cues (those that are experienced through behaviour and appearance of staff) and pleasant surprises. Additionally, consumers expressed a desire for experiencing new things and to become more actively involved in the co-production of future stay experiences.

Within the experience economy, producers compete beyond products and services by designing and delivering meaningful and memorable customer experiences that guests are willing to pay a premium for (Frow & Payne, 2007; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Sundbo, 2009). By engaging with a group of purposefully targeted consumers, this study gained a deep understanding from frequent-staying hotel guests of their experience preferences and forward-looking experience desires. Thus, the findings provide important insights for producers into what consumers were looking for, and potentially, what they were likely to be willing to pay a premium for when experiencing the future luxury hotel guest room. Consequently, this research advances our understanding of memorable experience concepts in the future luxury guest room.

Scholars in consumer experience research acknowledge that whilst the understanding of the experience itself is well advanced, the systematic utilization of experience concepts remains in an unmanaged state (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). To this end, the study found that the four realms of experience framework is a useful, practical tool to manage experience research. The theoretical contributions of this study are relevant to the management, marketing and innovation literature, and the practical contributions will be of interest to luxury hotel operators, as well as business and design practitioners in tourism, hospitality and related service industry sectors.

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