

Special Issue
**Past, present and future challenges on customer
experience: Digging knowledge across sectors**

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Experiences are everywhere, and everything is an experience. None of other marketing concepts has probably captured more attention of scholars and practitioners simultaneously, and more consistently across time, than the so-called “Customer Experience”. Indeed, experiential marketing roots its origin in the early 1980s (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Holbrook & Corfman, 1985), when academicians started to suggest a shift from primarily utilitarian conceptions of consumer behaviour towards an expanded experiential and phenomenological perspective where hedonic, symbolic, and aesthetic aspects of consumption are key aspects to be considered when grasping to fully understand consumption acts. Since then, the experiential paradigm has been attracting huge attention from both researchers belonging to different disciplines (e.g. marketing, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.) and the industry. Over time, different frameworks have arisen, where consumer experience has been conceptualised as a combination of escapism, aesthetics, entertainment and education (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), or dimensions of strategic experiential modules (Schmitt, 1999), namely sensory experience (SENSE), emotional experience (FEEL), thinking experience (THINK), operational experience (ACT) and related experiences (RELATE). More re-

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cently, both theoretical and empirical studies have showed that a key challenge for any marketers is to be able to provide authentic and memorable experiences (Gibbs & Ritchie, 2010), and the challenge for both practitioners and academicians is to capture Customer Experience at the intersection of the digital, physical and social realms (Bolton, McColl-Kennedy, Cheung, Gallan, Orsingher, Witell & Zaki, 2018).

The experiential view is no longer new, and has continuously been revisited, adding dimensions; but the dual hedonic/utilitarian concept has continued to interest academic writers across the decades, with retailing and tourism emerging as two paradigmatic experiential service settings, as shown in the papers considered for this Special Issue. Indeed, retailing has been a preferred field for applications and replications of experiential dimensions of shopping values (e.g. Mathwick et al., 2001; Petermans et al., 2013) while, within research set in a tourism context, adopting an experiential paradigm has been even scarcer (Ritchie et al., 2011). In tourism-related literature, most of the existing studies have investigated the tourist experience on site (e.g. Williams, 2006), whilst less attention has been given to experiences in supporting services (e.g. accommodation, food, transportation, wineries, etc.). Works in this Special Issue contribute to balance this deficit.

The Customer Experience as a notion, presents lights and shadows, which exist in both an intra-concept and inter-concept approach. From the realm of an internal conceptualisation of what Customer Experience is, despite the long and deep range of works devoted to this domain, there is a wide diversity and range of meanings attached to the concept of experience, causing a lack of universal consensus on its definition. Indeed, the word “experience” is among the most used and misused in marketing literature, and a need of framing what experience is and how it can be defined still remains (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, no single model of experiential consumption has emerged (Titz, 2007). Hence, there is still an interest for further research aimed at framing and delimiting what the “consumption experience” is and how it relates to other notions, such as brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Andreini et al., 2018), or service experience (Blocker & Barrios, 2015).

Moreover, added to this intra-concept lack of conceptual delimitation, Customer Experience also lacks inter-concept clarification, as it is related to other main and pivotal contemporary topics, such as Consumer Value and Value Co-creation.

Consumer Value has been considered at the very heart of any experiential approach to consumer behaviour (Holbrook, 1999; Wu & Liang, 2009). Albeit, understanding the process of creating and attributing value has inter-

ested a relevant number of scholars, who have long agreed on a lack of consistency concerning the nature of value, its characteristics and its conceptualisation and measurement. Although authors recognise that service value is multidimensional, there is no consensus on the number of types or on the criteria for classifying and assessing them. Recently, Gallarza et al. (2017) carried out, proposed and validated a third-order value model in the hotel sector that captures the resulting eight value types (efficiency, excellence, play, aesthetics, status, esteem, ethics, and escapism as an adaptation of spirituality). The case-specific nature of this research (i.e. set in the hotel sector) calls for future adaptations and replications of this higher-order structure in different service settings. Longitudinal studies might be also useful to capture the dynamics of the industry, of demand and society, and to further advance the knowledge of processes and interaction in the context of experience consumption. Recently, academicians have started to investigate how experience/service consumption can contribute to positively influence the lives and well-being of individuals (Anderson & Ostrom, 2015). In this strand of research (i.e. transformative service research), a “new” type of value (i.e. transformative value) is considered to acknowledge the “social dimension of value creation that generates uplifting change for greater well-being among individuals and collectives” (Blocker & Barrios, 2015, p. 1). In tourism-related literature, transformative value has been considered as what the travellers can gain from travel experiences in terms of reconsidering the personal value system as opposed to others’ (Kirillova et al., 2017a, 2017b; Pung et al., 2019; Pung & Del Chiappa, 2019), and therefore digging knowledge on the multidimensional Customer Experience in terms of building or renewing the self, learning, opening one’s mind, fostering understanding, enrichment, growth, and development (Reisinger, 2013). In current literature, this “new” value has been mainly theoretically conceptualised and qualitatively investigated. Future research could propose studies attempting to develop and validate scales to measure it and/or consider it alongside other types of value when quantitatively investigating the influence of different value types on satisfaction, memorability and behavioural intentions.

It is well accepted that Customer Experience can be viewed from multiple perspectives including the customer, the firm, or both in the co-creation process (Chandler & Lusch, 2015). Value co-creation “is the joint, collaborative, concurrent, peer-like process of producing new value, both materially and symbolically” (Calvagno & Dalli, 2014, p. 644). In such a scenario, consumers become a kind of “working consumers” (Dalli & Cova, 2009), actively shaping/making their lived experience in a marketscape in which consumers and producers live in a continuum between co-harmony and co-destruction

(Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010). The role of subjective and lived consumer experience in value co-creation/co-destruction is an emerging topic that would merit further attention to deepen our understanding about how customers live this experience (e.g. Calvagno & Dalli, 2014) and about how the co-creation/destruction of experiences – eventually mediated and facilitated by Information and Communication Technologies, Social Media, Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality – might contribute to render them memorable/unmemorable. This research trajectory would merit to be developed to consider the challenging role that the uprise of sharing and collaborative economy has been exerting since the very last few years, also providing consumers with the opportunity to transform their self (Decrop et al., 2018).

Research investigating experiences usually takes a process and/or an outcome-based perspective (Lin & Kuo, 2016), and underlines that one of the major challenges in developing an exceptional and memorable experience is to create a connection among different offline and online touchpoints within the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017). This calls for further developing the existing theoretical and empirical knowledge (e.g. Barwitz & Maas, 2018; Kranzbuhler et al., 2017) about how the consumer experience can be designed and lived in multichannel decision-making settings (e.g. retailing, tourism, hospitality and leisure).

This special issue was launched to call for research papers aiming to deepen our understanding around some of the aforementioned research venues.

Several paper proposals were received by national and international scholars (namely fourteen), thus confirming the relevant interest that academicians have in further deepening our knowledge in the field of Customer Experience. After a double round of blind review involving national and international reviewers (from UK, Spain, France, Greece and United Arab Emirates), five papers have been finally accepted to be published in this special issue.

The special issue opens with the paper “The use of experiential logic in marketing and management: a systematic literature review”, authored by Fabio Forlani and Tonino Pencarelli”, as the best introduction to the Special Issue. The work sets the basics for the experiential logic in terms of both its scholar and professional relevance, and this is empirically evidenced through a quantitative measurement of the diffusion of experiential marketing and management concepts in academic literature. Indeed, as progress forms previous state of the art on the experiential approach, Forlani and Pencarelli perform a bibliometric analysis of the experience-related citations in SciVerse Scopus database ending up in December 2018. After a screening, authors come up with a database of 2010 papers, showing the broad and intense interest of scholars in the topic. An inductive content analysis follows,

by studying keywords through T-Lab software, to identify the main experiential approach adopted and the main sectors of application. The knowledge brought is therefore both general and specific and, taking into consideration the aforementioned difficulties of conceptual delimitation of the notion of Customer Experience, we are sure this paper will be of great help for future researchers, to adopt the general but still granular knowledge needed for studying customer experiences.

The second paper authored by Marco Ieva and Cristina Ziliani “Understanding the Customer Experience-Loyalty link: a moderated mediation model”, addresses aspects related to the centrality of Customer Experience being a core concept in a chain of constructs, all relevant for capturing the essence of consumption. Into the wide research applying a mean-end approach to Customer Experience, Ieva and Ziliani test and contrast, through a moderated mediation analysis, the relationships between Customer Experience (in its varied Cognitive, Positive and Negative Affective, Sensorial and Social dimensions) and Customer Loyalty, where constructs such as Customer Satisfaction and Shopping Enjoyment act respectively as mediator and moderator. The model is tested with PLS upon a sample of 2,924 shoppers, evaluating their retailing experiences. Results show a partial mediating role for almost all Customer Experience Dimensions, combined with a direct relationship occurring between Customer Experience and Customer Loyalty. On the top of clarifying effects from either mediator (here Customer Satisfaction) and moderator (Shopping Enjoyment) variables, retailing experiences are depicted and measured through this comprehensive model, calling for replications in other service settings.

As mentioned, retailing and tourism are preferred fields of implementation of scholar knowledge on the Customer Experience. The last three papers all provide insights on the application of Customer Experience in tourism and hospitality settings.

Napolitano, Del Chiappa and Kim in their paper “The influence of servicescape and perceived authenticity on winery visitors’ satisfaction and behavioural intentions” address Customer Experiences in a relatively new and still unexplored tourism realm, in spite of its truly experiential nature: the wine tourism market. The paper tests a causal model through multiple regression analysis on a sample of 267 visitors at wineries in the region of Sardinia (Italy). In this work, both various servicescape dimensions (physical environment, facilities, and personnel interactions) and perceived levels of authenticity (object-based authenticity and existential authenticity) are considered as determinants of wine tourists’ satisfaction as well as of different types of behavioural intentions (i.e. intention to sustain electronic word of

mouth, intention to revisit the winery, and the willingness to get to know the production area where the best and the most renowned regional wines are made). The conclusions derived from this study add to both the topic of authenticity in tourism and hospitality studies, and to the growing interest of the wine-related sector, highlighting its multifaceted experiential aspects to be managed in short visits.

The paper “Consumer experience in heritage tourism: empirical evidence from an Italian cultural district” authored by Calza, Ferretti, Risitano and Sorrentino explores another underscored experiential realm in tourism (i.e. cultural districts) and offers therefore innovative insights for heritage consumption, in its many facets. Here, it is an agglomeration of local firms which is aimed, where hand-crafted goods are produced with respect towards traditions, history and the local community, at San Gregorio Armeno (Naples, Italy). Similarly to previous papers in this Special Issue, SEM structural equation modelling (SEM) is adopted and a survey is run with 400 tourists to test a causal model relating visitor experience, tourist satisfaction, memorable experience and behavioural intentions. Findings show positive relationships among all variables and interesting moderating effects of gender and past experience. Memorability and multidimensionality of the Customer Experience in tourism are evidenced in this paper, where the idiosyncrasy of cultural districts as peculiar settings comes at a play, and invites for further research on other heritage settings, to corroborate the structure of relationships and the moderating effects of demographics and travel-related variables.

The last paper, “Measuring tourists’ emotional experiences in small destinations. An investigation in a cultural site”, authored by Cannas and Pettinao investigates the role of emotions and the engagement with local community in shaping visitors’ experiences, their satisfaction and behavioural intentions towards a heritage and cultural site. Specifically, it applies a series of statistical analysis to a sample of 254 visitors at the Rosas Mine village, located in south-west of Sardinia to test the extent to which a modified version of the Destination Emotional Scale and the Memorable Tourism Experience Scale suite the specific context of cultural/heritage sites. On the whole, the study confirms the relevant role that emotions have in shaping the visitors’ experience, while highlighting the need to develop further research aimed at developing a tailored version of the scales measuring the emotional status in the specific context of heritage/cultural sites and attractions.

At the end of such a great experience of managing this Special Issue, which had all the components to be memorable and multidimensional, the guest editors would wish to thank all the authors for contributing to this Spe-

cial Issue, and all the national and international reviewers for the useful comments and suggestions they provided authors to further improve the quality of their manuscripts. Last, but not least, we are deeply grateful to the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal (Professor Dalli) for giving us the possibility to undertake such a wonderful “journey” and the Managing Editor (Dr Raffaella Bellani) for her continuous assistance and support.

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