

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF EXPERIENCE CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN TOURISM SERVICE DESIGN

ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing importance placed on the delivery of memorable experiences in the tourism sector, there have been only limited attempts to comprehensively detail how experiences can be successfully conceptualised in practice. Based on a critical literature review of both experience and service concept development theory in conjunction with and the findings from case research, this paper will make a unique contribution to a very significant gap in experience design literature by presenting a conceptual model of the activities necessary for experience conceptualisation in a tourism context.

Key Words: Tourism, experience, concept development

INTRODUCTION

The process of developing memorable customer experiences in modern business is an essential means of creating superior value and competitive advantage (Voss, 2004). As tourists become increasingly sophisticated and discerning in nature a significant issue affecting world tourism is the development of quality tourism experiences (Page, 2007). Morgan et al. (2009) confirm that while tourism practitioners recognise the arrival of the experience economy, the overriding issue currently facing them is how to create and put into practice this new desire for tourism experiences. Despite considerable research efforts over the past twenty years on the nature and characteristics of experiences more in-depth research is required into understanding the nature of an experience concept and how it can be articulated. The stage of concept development is well documented and considered a critical stage in the overall process of new service development, but it has not been effectively employed in the development of experience concepts. It is widely acknowledged that the field of experience design would benefit further theoretical investigation (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2000; Pullman and Gross, 2003; Stuart and Tax, 2004). For Gupta and Vajic (2000) the design of experiences rests on creating activities that engage customers. By conceptualising the process of experience development, this paper wishes to add to both academic and practitioner knowledge on the delivery of memorable tourism experiences. This will be achieved by integrating the most salient aspects of both experience and service concept development literature to provide the theoretical building blocks of a conceptual model. As theory does not offer all the answers when developing a conceptual model, a pilot case study is undertaken to explore the real life practices of an Irish best practice tourism practitioner ‘The Guinness Storehouse’ in order to observe and gather data on their approach to experience concept design.

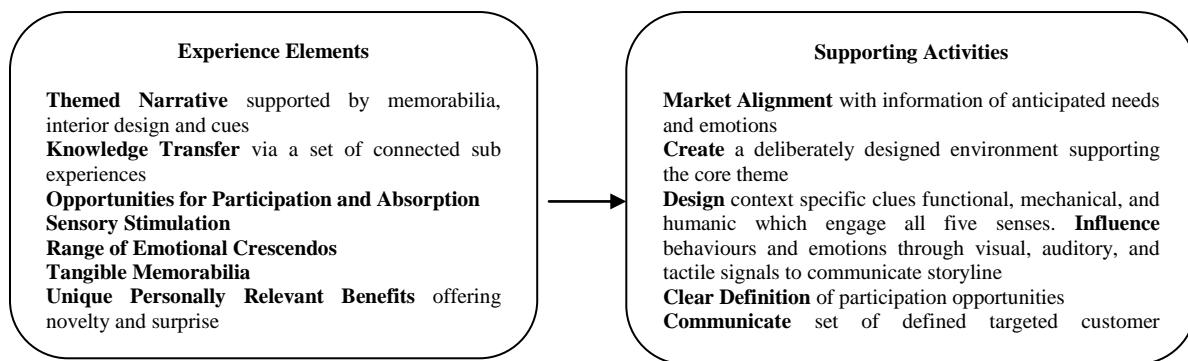
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Characteristics of Experiences

The term experience has come to represent services of a higher order, as ‘optimal or extraordinary’ events that are typified by high levels of emotional intensity with the experience narrative revealed over time (Arnould and Price, 1993). However, the conceptual configuration of tourism experiences remains particularly challenging (Aho, 2001; Berridge, 2007). Early work applies psychology literature to understanding the nature of emotional characteristics of consumptive experiences. Havlena and Holbrook (1986) tested Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) dimensions model and found that the three factors of pleasure, arousal, and dominance can successfully be used to describe the emotional character of consumption experiences. Pleasure refers to the degree to which a person feels good, happy, or satisfied in the situation; arousal refers to the degree to which a person feels excited or stimulated; and dominance refers to the extent to which the individual feels in control of the situation. Wasserman et al. (2000) found that customer behaviours and emotions are influenced by visual elements such as interior design, symbols and cues, which, when aligned with the emotional dimensions of pleasure, arousal and power, can be used as tool to anticipate and generate appropriate customer emotional scripts. Arnould and Price (1993), building on Csikszentmihalyi (1990; 1991; 1997) state of complete absorption ‘flow’, depicts extraordinary experiences as typified by high levels of emotional intensity with the experience narrative revealed over time. Pullman and Gross (2003) regard using either of these characteristics as a basis for service operations experience design as difficult as both expectations and outcome are difficult to measure and often unclear. However, these experience characteristics might be employed particularly for tourism activity providers where the opportunity exists for customers to have a high level of participation. Pine and Gilmore (1998; 1999) advanced experience theory from the realm of psychology to the commercial domain, asserting that customer engagement across the mutually compatible dimensions of participation (passive to active) and connection (absorption and immersion) together form uniquely memorable experiences. It is of major significance that experiences for Pine and Gilmore (1998) are not considered as amorphous constructs; rather they are as real as any service differing only in the manner in which they engage customers across the dimensions. They extol designers to stage themed experiences with the use of cues and memorabilia to engage all five senses. The use of the latter is particularly applicable to tourism services where the use of themed scripting mixed with memorabilia and sensory stimulation can enhance the interpretation of inanimate physical material. Poulsson and Kale (2004) assert that an encounter becomes an experience when a customer feels all or any some of the following, personal relevance, novelty, surprise, learning or engagement. The element of participation and co-creation is echoed by Echeverri (2005) who argues that a service only becomes real when a customer interacts with some specific prerequisites – such as organisational structures, activities, people, and other customers. Brunner-Sperdin & Peters (2009) aptly condenses this aspect pointing out that as experiences require human participation, only active partakers can experience.

Chase and Dasu (2001) consider that experiences are assembled through perceptions formed by individual interpretation relying on mental engagement which is assessed by the range of pain or pleasure, the high and low points, and the conclusion. A service experience is manifested as a succession of sub-experiences packed with messages which build and influence a storyline and indeed the customers overall assessment of a service (Berry et al., 2006). These feelings or sub experiences can be managed by engineering customer experiences through the design and integration of experience clues such as the visual, auditory, tactile signals emanating from service offerings (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994). For Berridge (2007) understanding that an experience is a by-product of a deliberately designed environment is of critical importance to designers. The conceptual stage of experience design can benefit from Chase and Dasu (2001) understanding of how customers evaluate service experiences as a cumulative perception. Designers can guide and influence customer perceptions and behaviour by designing the context specific experience clues (functional, mechanical, and humanic) which combine to create the experience. Aho (2001) contextualises tourism experiences as emotional and learning experiences, recorded as *mental imprints* (Aho, 2001). Experience emotions can precede the actual experience, entering the mind as arousing expectations, and taken away as memories which may last a lifetime, tangibilised with souvenirs and photographs. Otto and Ritchie (1996) assert that tourism services are generally consumed for emotional stimulation which influences the overall satisfaction of the service. Experience emotions, viewed psychologically are the feelings which are manifested via triggers or impulses which generate the experience (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009). They assert that experiences require co-creation, adding that value is perceived by the customer during and after the experience by the level of captivation experienced in the encounter. In advancing towards our aim of creating a model for experience concept design, figure 1 presents the experience elements and activities which will form a component of its assembly.

Figure 1: Tourism Experience Elements and Activities



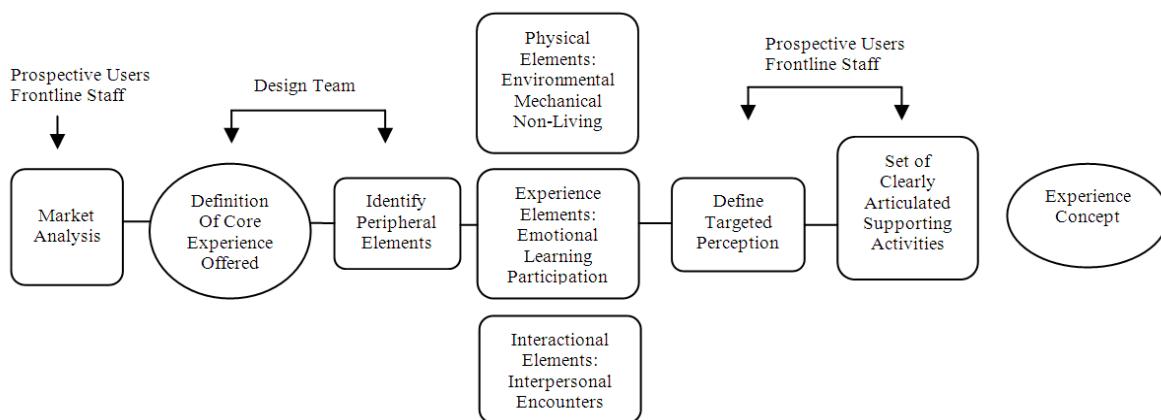
Experience Concept Articulation and Development

Originally, coined by Sasser et al. (1978) the service concept was the term used to describe the bundle of elements packaged for sale to the customer. Further proponents explored the key elements of a service concept with Heskett (1986) referring to it as the organisations business proposition which outlines the ‘how’ and ‘what’ structure of a service to be provided. Heskett (1986) asserts that splitting the service concept into its components for operational ease removes some of the ‘fuzziness’ which practitioners often perceive in the process. Experiences concepts like service concepts can be broken up into components, using Iacobucci and Ostrom (1993) depiction of service core attributes and peripheral attributes is useful as a basis for experience design. The ‘core’ represents the overall experience that both the organisation and the customer perceive as the experience or ‘the part of the service we think of when we name the service’ (Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1993:158), which is supported by the usage of the term ‘visitor experience’ in many tourism organisations titles. The ‘peripheral’ attributes (everything else) are subdivided further into physical and interactional attributes, physical attributes include environmental, mechanical, and non-living components of the service delivery and interactional attributes include all of the interpersonal encounters which occur in the service delivery (Anderson et al.2008). Subsequent work has taken a consumer centric approach examining the benefits and the value perceived by customers from a service (Lovelock, 1999; Edvardsson, 2000). Goldstein et al.’s (2002) assert that deconstructing a service into its components permits designers to isolate each element of a service and ensure it matches customers’ needs, which is the first step in designing and delivering successful services. Fynes and Lally (2008) assert that the incorporation of experiential components into service design requires the development of a service experience concept. As experiences are a progression from services (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), Fynes and Lally (2008) conceptual experience concept embraces the services literature

elements of benefits, people, physical, process and perception and also necessitates the inclusion of experience-specific emotional and participation elements. While their conceptual model has not been empirically tested, it is of assistance in identifying the elements which support the core desired customer outcomes.

Williams (2006) aptly summarises the relevance of clear concept definition by referring to the Canadian Tourism Commission marketing strategy which states '*you can't create a positive experience if the experience hasn't been defined*'. This supports Gupta and Vajic (2002) proposition that an experience should be coordinated around a clearly designed core activity or concept reinforced by additional elements such as physical layout and human components. Berry et al. (2002) consider that the holistic nature of designed experiences makes them extremely difficult to copy. In addition to defining the elements of an experience concept it must be recognised that a set of organisational activities which support the appropriate delivery of the emotional, behavioural and performance characteristics of experiences is required (Stuart and Tax, 2004). It is critical to clearly articulate the supporting activities in order to avoid '*fuzziness*' in the front end of service design and an over dependence on the back-end execution focused design activities (Khurana & Rosenthal, 1997). Involving customer and staff in the concept development process provides role clarification (Edvardsson and Olsson (1986). It assists with identifying customer requirements and can also lead to improved customer service (Schneider and Bowen, 1984). Magnusson et al. (2003) contend that user involvement has a positive effect on the quality of the created service ideas and can result in a mutual learning process resulting in valuable information of customer's real needs and wants. Figure 2 outlines the theoretical stages and activities for developing an experience concept.

Figure 2: Theoretical Stages of Tourism Experience Concept Development



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To progress the development of a model of tourism experience concept development the research adopted a qualitative case study methodology on the Guinness Storehouse, an Irish tourism experience that has demonstrated industry best practice (Voss, 2006; Williams, 2006). A number of data collection methods were utilised including interviews, direct-observation, and documentary analysis. This case study's primary aim was to build an understanding of the components of the experience concept at the Guinness Storehouse and to understand the process by which it was achieved.

Case Study

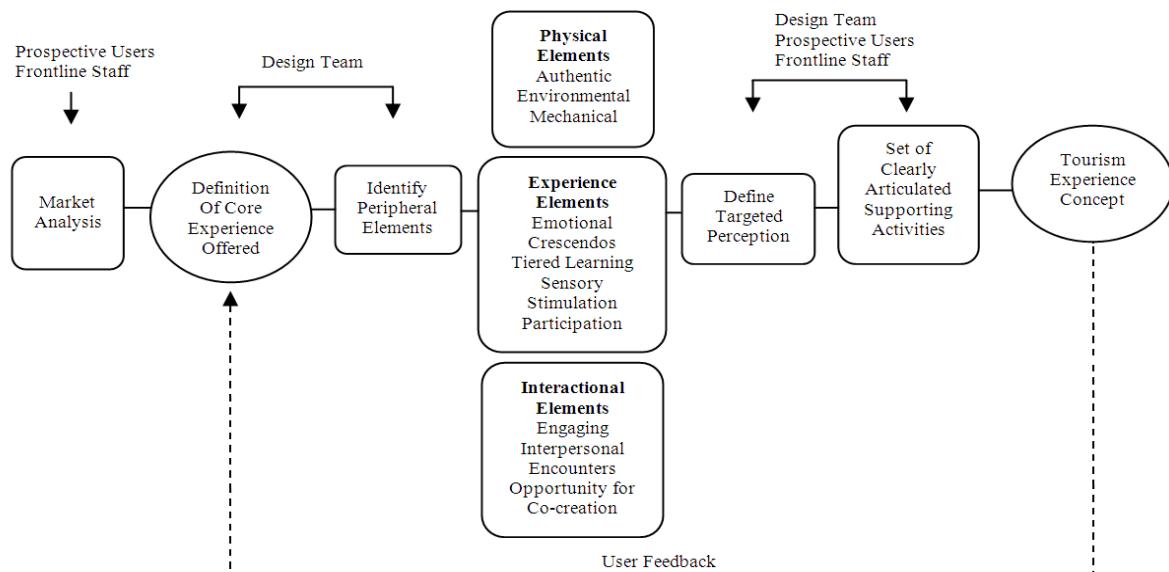
Located in the historic St. James Gate area of Dublin, the Guinness Storehouse, formerly the onsite fermentation plant is a seven storey visitor experience dedicated to the history and production process of the world famous Guinness brand. A number of criteria informed the brief for the development of the Guinness Storehouse experience concept which included the development of a tourist attraction to immerse visitors in the Guinness brand, the provision of on-site event facilities for corporate Ireland, and a space to house the vast Guinness archive. The Design team were asked to incorporate the three core elements of the Guinness brand into the design process: *Power, Goodness and Communion*. Designers allowed 'the industrial vernacular of the building' (i.e. the authentic architecture and equipment from the brewing process) to project the *power* element

of the experience. The *goodness* element is interpreted through the ingredients of barley, hops and water shown in their natural state, but maximised through high levels of sensory engagement incorporated into their presentation. The *communion* element is evident through the various stages of the experience with a variety of communal areas attracting visitors to relax and interact with both the brand and other visitors. Visitors are immediately absorbed into the Guinness Storehouse experience on stepping into the vast atrium designed as a giant pint glass ascending over seven floors. However, the Guinness Storehouse acknowledges that it is not possible to sustain the initial ‘wow’ factor or emotional engagement which visitors experience on entry. The core visitor experience is supported by a variety of supporting elements which offer personal interaction. Authentic physical elements presented in a variety of modes enhanced with the use of multimedia, provide a series of sensory stimuli, connection and emotional engagement delivered in peaks and troughs throughout the tour. There is the high degree of personal control evident in the tour; visitors can pause at any time to sit at a cafe or a viewing area whilst still partaking in the experience. The experience requires a degree of knowledge transfer, hence, tiered levels of information and knowledge transfer are provided. The Guinness Storehouse considers that their employees play an active part in the visitor experience. It is common for a visitor to engage with the same employee at entry stage and again at the experience summit the ‘Gravity Bar’ where visitors receive a complimentary pint of Guinness to be enjoyed while enjoying 360° views over Dublin city. The Guinness Storehouse experience communicates a clearly targeted perception of the Guinness brand, reinforced positively through the use of displays of high quality natural ingredients and the addition of a social responsibility component. The key benefits include brand affinity, connection, knowledge, learning, participation and engagement. The experience generates emotions of excitement, surprise, pleasure, control, and authenticity. Through a range of customer feedback methods the Storehouse can design a set of defined customer perceptions which deliver expected visitor experience outcomes. The design team actively use feedback to improve and enhance the experience at regular intervals. Altogether, these elements combine to support the core concept of the Guinness visitor experience making it truly memorable! The Guinness Storehouse has become the number one Irish tourist experience in spite of it not being the core Guinness product and has won many national and international awards. The following are a summary of the elements of the Storehouse experience concept: a scripted theme, authentic physical elements, a range of emotions including excitement, surprise, pleasure and personal control, tiered levels of knowledge transfer, sensory stimulation, brand connection & emotional engagement. The experience is supported by activities including the use of mobile elements, knowledgeable and engaging staff, the interactive use of mixed media, and the active solicitation of customer feedback.

CONCEPTUALISING EXPERIENCE CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Figure 3 presents a conceptual model delineating the stages, elements and activities of tourism experience concept development. The conceptual model stands as a representation of the elements from both theoretical and practitioner viewpoints.

Figure 3: Tourism Experience Concept Development



CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a discussion of the most salient aspects of both experience and service concept development literature. As theory does not offer all the answers when developing a conceptual model, a pilot case study was undertaken to explore the real life practices of an Irish best practice tourism practitioner. Both theoretical and practitioner findings were combined to develop a conceptual model of tourism experience concept design. This model will have to be brought to industry for a further series of case studies to validate and test in a more in-depth manner. The paper has achieved its original objectives of addressing the gap in extant literature on the manner by which tourism experiences concepts can be developed.

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