



## An epistemological view of consumer experiences

Andrew R. Walls<sup>a,\*</sup>, Fevzi Okumus<sup>b</sup>, Youcheng (Raymond) Wang<sup>b</sup>, David Joon-Wuk Kwun<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway St, San Francisco, CA 94132, United States

<sup>b</sup> Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida, United States

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the theoretical underpinnings of consumer experience by examining the definitions of experience and the contextual nature of consumer experiences. It offers a framework to better understand this construct in a hospitality and tourism context. The proposed framework demonstrates the multidimensional facets of the consumer experience. An extensive review of the literature identified three stream of empirical research. The paper suggests that the perception of consumer experience has numerous foundational origins that have complicated its growth as a viable and valued concept. This study proposes a number of emerging themes that give credence and direction to the concept of consumer experiences.

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### 1. Introduction

More and more companies in the hospitality and tourism industry are focusing on creating and managing “experiences” for their customers. It is not sufficient to offer a functional level of products and services, and offerings must be accompanied by “experiences” to differentiate themselves in the increasingly commoditized and competitive business environment (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schwartz, 1990). As the economy offers more and more commoditized products and services, hospitality companies should find ways to differentiate themselves from their respective competitors. One way this can be achieved is by focusing on the design and delivery of service experiences in an effort to increase satisfaction and loyalty. Authors have insisted that the service sector has been transformed into a dream society (Jensen, 1999), entertainment economy (Wolf, 1999), attention economy (Davenport and Beck, 2002), and experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Schmitt, 1999).

From a marketing perspective, consumers want more than just the delivery and consumption of products and services. Instead, they seek unique consumption encounters to accompany the products and services that create memorable experiences. Therefore, businesses need to shift their focus from a “delivery-focused” service economy to one that emphasizes high-quality products and services and “staged” experiences that create memorable consumer experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). In a hospitality and tourism

setting, practically everything a “tourist goes through at a destination is an experience, be it behavioral or perceptual, cognitive or emotional, expressed or implied” (Oh et al., 2007, p. 120). Carbone and Haeckel (1994) argued that “customers always get more than they bargain for, because a product or service always comes with an experience. That experience may be good or bad, lasting or fleeting, a random phenomenon or an engineered perception” (p. 9).

Despite the enthusiastic movement toward the experience economy and its particular relevance to the hospitality and tourism industry (Gilmore and Pine, 2002; Titz, 2007), the literature has demonstrated a wide-ranging and perplexing set of definitions and theoretical meanings. Though this is explained partially by the multidisciplinary use and application of the experience concept, it appears that there is a need to move cautiously and succinctly toward a better understanding of this important construct distinctively in the field of hospitality and tourism. To this end, this paper seeks to (1) examine various approaches and definitions of experience and discuss the contextual nature of consumer experiences; (2) discuss the diverse theoretical underpinnings of consumer experience in the hospitality and tourism industry; and (3) propose a new set of definitions supported by a conceptual framework to better understand the composition of the hospitality and tourism consumer experience.

### 2. Defining the family of experiences

The theoretical origins of consumer experience may be traced back to several specialized fields of behavioral science. These fields include cultural industry systems (Hirsch, 1972), esthetics (Jaeger, 1945; Kaplan, 1987), psycholinguistics affective response (Osgood et al., 1957), and fantasy, imagery, and multi-sensory within psychology (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Singer, 1966; Swanson,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [arwalls@sfsu.edu](mailto:arwalls@sfsu.edu), [arwalls99@gmail.com](mailto:arwalls99@gmail.com) (A.R. Walls), [fokumus@mail.ucf.edu](mailto:fokumus@mail.ucf.edu) (F. Okumus), [raywang@mail.ucf.edu](mailto:raywang@mail.ucf.edu) (Y. Wang), [dkwun@mail.ucf.edu](mailto:dkwun@mail.ucf.edu) (D.J.-W. Kwun).

**Table 1**  
Summary of experience definitions.

Author (year)	Definition
Ray (2008)	Experiences interrupt people from their lives and expectations to provide something of interest that demands attention; experiences themselves are incredibly involving.
Lashley (2008)	Discusses tourism experiences from the perspective of creating hospitable relationships between the host and guest; these experiences engage emotions, which is essential to creating a memory.
Titz (2007)	No single model of experiential consumption has emerged; experiential consumption is central to a comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in the hospitality and tourism context.
Mossberg (2007)	A blend of many elements coming together and involve the consumer emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually.
Oh et al. (2007)	From a consumers perspective experiences are “enjoyable, engaging, memorable encounters for those consuming these events.”
Andersson (2007)	The tourist experience is proposed as the moment when tourism consumption and tourism production meet.
Uriely (2005)	The tourist experience is currently depicted as an obscure and diverse phenomenon, which is mostly constituted by the individual consumer.
Berry et al. (2002)	The means of orchestrating all the clues that people detect in the buying process.
Lewis and Chambers (2000)	The total outcome to the customer from the combination of environment, goods, and services purchased.
McLellan (2000)	The goal of experience design is to orchestrate experiences that are functional, purposeful, engaging, compelling, and memorable.
Schmitt (1999)	Experiences are private events that are not self-generated but rather occur in response to some staged situation and involve the entire being.
Gupta and Vajic (1999)	An experience occurs when a customer has any sensation or knowledge acquisition resulting from some level of interaction with different elements of a context created by a service provider.
Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999)	A distinct economic offering that are as different from services as services are from goods; successful experiences are those that the customer finds unique, memorable and sustainable over time, would want to repeat and build upon, and enthusiastically promotes via word of mouth.
O’Sullivan and Spangler (1998)	Involves the participation and involvement of the individual in the consumption and the state of being physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, or spiritually engaged found that experience.
Carlson (1997)	An experience can be defined as a constant flow of thoughts and feelings that occur during moments of consciousness.
Merriam-Webster (1993)	The fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through a direct observation or participation.
Arnould and Price (1993)	Extraordinary experiences are those characterized by high levels of emotional intensity.
Denzin (1992)	Extra ordinary experiences rupture routines and live and provoke radical redefinitions of the self. In moments of epiphany, people redefine themselves. Epiphanies are connected to turning-point experiences.
Csikszentmihalyi (1990)	Flow is the optimal experience that keeps one motivated. This feeling often involves painful, risky or difficult efforts that stretch the person’s capacity as well as an element of novelty and discovery. Flow is an almost effortless yet highly focused state of consciousness and yet the descriptions do not vary much by culture, gender, or age.
Mannell (1984)	An experience or state of mind, is uniquely individual and that the quality rather than the quantity of leisure in our lives deserves attention.
Hirschman and Holbrook (1982)	Those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multi-sensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products.
Maslow (1964)	Peak experience is the experiences in which the individual transcends ordinary reality and perceives being or ultimate reality. Short in duration and accompanied by positive affect.
Thorne (1963)	Peak experience is subjectively recognized to be one of the high points of life, one of the most exciting, rich and fulfilling experiences which the person has ever had. A experience may be described operationally as a subjective experiencing of what is subjectively recognized to be one of the lowest points of life, one of the worst, most unpleasant and harrowing experiences of life.

1978). Motivation research within the marketing field focuses on the emotional aspects of products/services, fantasies aroused by products (Dichter, 1960; Zajonc, 1980), and product symbolism (Denzin, 1992; Levy, 1959). While these studies contributed to the paradigm shift, extending the traditional methods used in consumer behavior research by incorporating more phenomenological approaches, one of the challenges in this stream of research is the diverse definitions of consumer experience (see Table 1).

As demonstrated in Table 1, experience has been a part of studies spanning many fields, demonstrating that there is a healthy and broad application of this concept. From a sociological and psychological perspective, Maslow (1964) defined peak experiences as those in which the individual transcends ordinary reality and perceives being or ultimate reality; it is short in duration and accompanied by positive affect. Similarly, Thorne (1963) defined peak experience as “subjectively recognized to be one of the high points of life, one of the most exciting, rich and fulfilling experiences which the person has ever had,” contrasting it with a Nadir experience, which is “subjectively recognized to be one of the lowest points of life, one of the worst, most unpleasant and harrowing

experiences of life” (p. 248). From an anthropological and ethnological perspective, an experience is the way in which culture affects the way an individual receives events into his or her consciousness (Carù and Cova, 2003). Though an experience is perceived according to an individual’s perspective, conceptually it is distinguishable from an ethnology perspective, which involves experiences that happen to others, society, and the world (Abrahams, 1986).

Employing an economic and marketing perspective, Schmitt (1999) declared that experiences are private, personal events that occur in response to some stimulation and involve the entire being as a result of observing or participating in an event. He postulated that in order to stimulate desired consumer experiences, marketers must provide the right setting and environment. Lewis and Chambers (2000) defined consumer experience as “the total outcome to the customer from the combination of environment, goods and services purchased” (p. 46). Finally, most researchers attempting to define the experience overlook the operational patterns that are common to many consumer experiences. For example, Solomon and Corbit (1974) described the *standard pattern of affective dynamics* that can shed light on the many empirical commonalities in

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