

## Towards a holistic approach to the travel experience: A qualitative study of bus transportation

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a qualitative study with 49 bus passengers in two types of mid-distance journeys: (1) experience-centric trips (touristic), and (2) utilitarian trips (intercity transportation). Study results show that passenger travel experience encompasses all moments of contact with the transportation service, as well as aspects that are not in direct control of the transportation provider. The results also reveal that the travel experience involves a holistic set of customer responses that go beyond cognitive assessments, also comprising sensorial and emotional components. The comparison of the two transportation settings shows that both experience-centric and utilitarian trip passengers have a holistic view of the travel experience, although focusing on different experience drivers and customer responses. These findings indicate that transport providers and planners should pay attention to the overall customer travel experience from a holistic view, and that transportation services should be carefully designed and managed in a systemic way.

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### 1. Introduction

Customer experience can be defined as “the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company” (Meyer and Schwager, 2007, p. 118). Voss et al. (2008) classify experience-centric services as the ones in which the customer experience is at the center of service provision (e.g., Disney theme parks or Guinness Storehouses). Customer experience has received increased attention since Pine and Gilmore (1998) advocated that a new era of Experience Economy was starting, and its focus has also evolved to a more multi-dimensional and holistic view (e.g., Gentile et al., 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009). The customer experience is important for all kinds of services, even non experience-centric ones, such as utilitarian or public transportation. Therefore, transport researchers, policymakers, vehicle designers, providers and even other interested parties are urged to better understand the factors that drive the travel experience and how it affects public transport demand in different travel settings (Paulley et al., 2006). This understanding is important to better plan transportation policy, vehicle design and service management.

Verhoef et al. (2009) argue that experiences have a holistic nature involving different experience components (ECs), which are customer’s cognitive, affective, social and physical responses to the

service. The total experience is formed through the search, purchase, consumption, and after-sale phases, and may involve multiple service channels. These authors have developed a generic experience creation model (which is adapted in Fig. 1), through which perceptions of the service provided (i.e., *experience factors* or EFs) such as social environment, service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment and price, drive customer responses (i.e., *experience components* or ECs), which form the customer experience.

In spite of the interest on customer experience in general, research on travel experience is scarce. Transport related studies have essentially evaluated transit service quality based on passenger cognitive expectations and perceptions of transportation attributes that are controlled by the transport provider (e.g., dell’Olio et al., 2011; Herrmann et al., 2000). Although some studies have addressed the uncontrolled factors to some extent, such as social aspects (e.g., Abou-Zeid and Ben-Akiva, 2011), a holistic view of the travel experience (from the first until the last moment of passenger contact with a provider) has not been addressed. When compared to traditional transit service quality, the travel experience is more complex, being influenced by various EFs, i.e., perceptions of the service provided that drive the passenger experience, some of which are not directly controlled by the transport provider or are dependent on technologic advancements that the passengers demand, such as information provision (Carreira et al., 2010). Moreover, the travel experience complexity involves other ECs beyond cognitive assessments, that result from a complex physical and psychological individual process (Oliver, 1993). Additionally the travel experience is extended in time, and it concerns all the interaction moments

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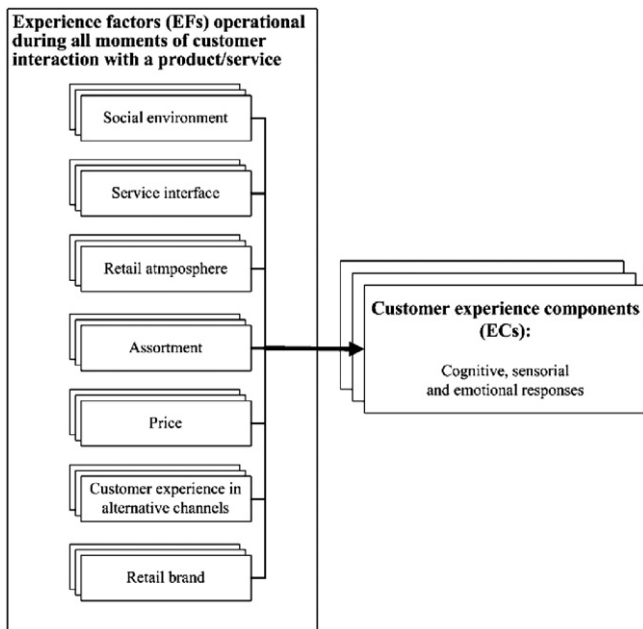


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of customer experience creation (adapted from Verhoef et al. (2009), Gentile et al. (2007)).

through multiple channels (e.g., ticket line or internet). In this context, further research is needed to address transportation experience from a holistic approach. This paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the travel experience, addressing the following questions:

- (i) What travel experience factors (EFs) drive the customer experience through the different moments of contact with a transport provider?
- (ii) What experience components (ECs) form the travel experience, i.e., what are customer responses to the provision of such transport?
- (iii) Is the customer travel experience only relevant during leisure trips, or is it also relevant in other types of transportation? How do experience drivers and responses change across the different transportation services?

To provide an in-depth understanding of the travel experience, a qualitative study was undertaken in purposefully selected mid-distance bus trips, as they were considered a rich empirical ground for this study. The two different bus transportation settings included one tourism service in the north of Portugal (experience-centric trip), and one mid-distance transportation service between Portuguese cities (utilitarian trip).

The following section summarizes the literature review related to travel experience, covering extant research on three relevant areas. The methodology used in the study is described in Section 3. The study results are presented in Section 4, starting by the detailed description of each specific sample and concluding with the identification of EFs and ECs in general, and for each of the two transportation settings. Finally Section 5 discusses research and managerial implications, and points out directions for future research.

## 2. State of the art

Service research has evolved from a focus on quality perceptions and cognitive assessments (Parasuraman et al., 1988), to experience quality evaluation (Klaus and Maklan, 2012) and finally

to a holistic view of customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007; Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Hekkert, 2006). On the other hand, transportation research has focused on service quality assessment (e.g., Herrmann et al., 2000) that can be seen as the result of a cognitive comparison between customer expectations and perceptions of service performance (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In what concerns experience studies, they have only addressed experience-centric services, such as leisure or tourism (e.g., Zomerdijsk and Voss, 2009; Pullman and Gross, 2004), but the customer experience can also be important for other services in which it is not at the center of service provision.

Some of the customer needs are identified in the literature as instrumental factors, i.e., associated to service functionality, while others are hedonic, i.e., associated to how a service is provided, such as social environment, feeling in control or context of usage (e.g., Anable and Gatersleben, 2005; Stradling et al., 2007; Patrício et al., 2009). However, hedonic factors have more potential to delight customers (Neal et al., 1999; Chitturi et al., 2008) and enhance their experience. Even though previous studies have addressed some hedonic factors that go beyond the transportation quality approach, such as feeling free and in control (e.g., Anable and Gatersleben, 2005; Stradling et al., 2007), a holistic approach to the travel experience is still missing. Extant research has shown a consistent positive relationship between customer loyalty and firms' profitability (e.g., Zeithaml et al., 1996). Thus, a broader understanding of the customer experience can provide useful insights to transport interested parties, namely transit providers, so they can enhance customer loyalty and improve their competitive position. Building upon Meyer and Schwager's (2007) experience definition, travel experience can be adapted to the transportation context as the holistic individual response arising from the passenger interactions with all aspects (e.g., tangible factors, multi-channel services, or other passengers) and across all moments of transportation provision.

Based on the conceptual model presented in Fig. 1, the literature review is structured around EFs and ECs. As research on travel experience is still scarce, the literature review covers related research on transport quality, service quality/satisfaction and customer experience fields, in order to identify potential EFs and ECs that may be relevant for the travel experience context. This literature review shows that extant transportation and service research is mostly empirical and based on quantitative assessments of service quality and satisfaction. On the other hand, research on experience is essentially conceptual, and even though it identifies EFs and ECs for generic service provision, it has not specifically addressed the travel experience from a holistic perspective.

### 2.1. Experience factors

Experience factors (EFs) can be defined as customer perceptions of all aspects of a product or service that contribute to the customer experience (Patrício et al., 2008). Table 1 synthesizes factors found in the mentioned literature areas that can potentially be associated with travelling.

Extant research has focused on transport quality factors such as comfort, cleanliness, information and safety (Nathanail, 2008; Eboli and Mazzulla, 2011; dell'Olio et al., 2011; Stradling et al., 2007; Anable and Gatersleben, 2005). Other factors such as environmental protection, itinerary and number of stops, or not having to drive, have been exclusively addressed in transport research (e.g., Beirão and Cabral, 2007), but from a transit quality perspective. There is extensive literature on transport quality, but it concentrates on the cognitive assessment of the service attributes which are controlled by the transport provider and typically focus on the actual trip, instead of examining the more extended multi-channel (Patrício et al., 2008) customer experience perspective. Moreover, even though prior empirical studies consider to some extent EFs

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