



Progress in Tourism Management

Management challenges with the maintenance of tourism experience concept innovations: Toward a new research agenda



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Innovation in the experience-based tourism sector.
- Concept innovation that provides total experience solutions.
- Maintenance of concept innovation and innovation systems over time.
- Maintenance by engaging internal and external actors in innovation maintenance.
- Theoretical foundation of new research agenda.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

This article suggests a new research agenda within the debates about tourism, the experience economy, and innovation. Knowledge about innovation and value co-creation within experience-based sectors has increased, but most studies focus on the initial steps of the innovation process. We argue that there is a need to focus on challenges that tourism management faces over time when it wishes to *maintain* innovations in an experience concept. Maintaining such innovations needs to be investigated from an organisational perspective. There are many reasons why it can be challenging to maintain innovative experience concepts over time. We address three important reasons and suggest an analytical model which employs four theoretical constructs namely, the experience concept, the experience system, internal engagement, and external engagement. We illustrate the model by applying it to three case vignettes from experience-based tourism. The case vignettes illuminate how “maintenance” is an important construct within experience innovation research.

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1. Introduction

During the last decade, there has been a significant increase in our knowledge about innovation and value co-creation within the experience economy and experience-based tourism (Alsos, Eide, & Madsen, 2014; Fuglsang, Sundbo, & Sørensen, 2011; Prebensen, Chen & Uysal, 2014; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). However, this article addresses a phenomenon which is almost absent in the research literature, namely the management challenges related to the *maintenance* of experience concept innovations. The concept of maintenance is needed because the organisational task of developing an experience innovation is not over after its first implementation. First, the innovation has to be adjusted to the emerging market conditions. New elements can be added to the innovation which show up through feed-back in the first market period (cf. the idea of after-innovation that has been observed within services, Sundbo, 2008). These can be used advantageously to adjust and develop the innovated experience product so that it provides more value for customers and becomes more profitable for the provider. Second, for something to be an innovation, it cannot be a stand-alone invention arising spontaneously in co-creation with customers or others; an innovation has to lead to collective practices that are reproduced later and to some degree standardised: In experience concept innovations, some elements must be permanent, some procedures must be fixed, and the storytelling about this particular experience must be reproducible. If not, the customers will not recognise it as a specific experience innovation, marketed and branded by the provider. This permanence, together with the after-innovation, could be called the maintenance of the experience concept. Such maintenance aspects are almost absent in the research literature, particularly the management challenges related to the maintenance of experience concept innovations. This article addresses these missing aspects and suggests a theoretical framework for understanding the maintenance problems. It will be done by a summary of existing relevant literature and, on the basis of this, proposing a model for understanding and studying maintenance mechanisms, which will be illustrated by three cases. Finally, we suggest further research.

While the concept of maintenance has so far not been important to innovation theory, it plays a role in so-called institutional work theory. It refers to the work that goes into maintaining institutions, for example by creating rules that enable certain routines to emerge, and infusing norms and routines into day-to-day work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Maintenance here refers mainly to societal innovations that enable certain institutional structures (regulative, normative and cognitive structures) to be sustained in practice. This perspective has also been adopted in new attempts to theorise innovation as institutionalisation (Vargo, Wieland, & Akaka, 2015). According to this approach, an innovation process involves institutional maintenance that, for example, conceals tensions and conflicts and reduces options for action (Callon, 1998; quoted by; Vargo et al., 2015). In this way, institutional maintenance becomes an important aspect of change and innovation

because it provides the enabling properties for certain innovations to emerge and become more permanent. However, the literature mostly focuses on the maintenance of institutions in a societal context. We have less knowledge about how innovations are maintained at the organisational level given or implying a certain institutional set-up. Following the above, maintenance of innovations at this level can be seen as the organisational structures and practices created and re-created within and between specific organisations that enable an innovation to become reproduced over time with the required adjustments and after-innovation in a self-reinforcing process, thus simultaneously ruling out other options. Maintenance is thus the organisational structures and practices within and between organisations that, in an enabling way, can lead to a more permanent framing of an innovation by dynamically forming structures and practices around this innovation.

At the centre of innovation maintenance in experiences is the “experience concept”. An experience concept is analogous to Normann’s (1991) idea of the “service concept” that he used to characterise what he called the service package, which contains a core service and some peripheral service elements. Similarly, an experience concept includes a core experience and peripheral experience elements. We argue that the development of a new experience concept is not over as soon as it has been introduced: the concept continues to be developed; it must be adjusted, repeated, and slightly renewed in all experience deliveries if the concept is to keep a business competitive. Thus, we define experience concept innovation as the development and realisation of multi-dimensional experiences that are connected in a coherent way and communicated to relevant target groups (cf. Pedersen, 2015). Experience concepts are recipes that bind activities and practices together in a coherent framework. By the *maintenance of experience concept innovation*, we mean keeping the experience concepts attractive and “alive” over time while having a relatively stable, but also an improved content (a kind of continuous innovation or development, cf. Wood, 1988). The day-to-day maintenance of innovations is a challenge. We therefore argue for a new research agenda that takes these problems into account. Thus our research question is: *How to theoretically frame and understand management challenges related to the maintenance of experience concept innovations?*

There are at least three main reasons why the maintenance of experience concept innovations represents management challenges and should become an important research agenda. Firstly, *maintenance is a critical but insufficiently understood part of the innovation process*. As has been said, innovation does not end when a new experience concept is introduced, yet the focus of innovation research has primarily been on what we see as the first steps of the innovation process, namely, the idea and research phases, the development/design phase and the introduction phase (Freeman & Soete, 1997; Gallouj & Djellal, 2010). This is also the case in research on innovation in experience sectors (Sundbo, Sørensen, & Fuglsang, 2013a). But the maintenance of the innovation is a critical challenge

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