



## Mobilising identity and culture in experience co-creation and venue operation



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### H I G H L I G H T S

- Examines the role of identity and cultural values in experience management.
- Uses empirical data to show how notions of identity and culture are mobilised.
- Considers the input of various stakeholders and factors in experience co-creation.
- Co-creation and venue operation practices are conceptualised as inducement.
- Identifies spatial, material, performative and representational practices.

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### A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the multiple ways in which notions of identity and associated cultural values are entangled in the management and operation of commercial hospitality spaces. The paper reviews literature on experience, identity and hospitality operations management within the experience paradigm and argues that existing work provides limited insights into how identities are 'experientialised' within hospitality venues. Empirical data are used to demonstrate how management and consumers mobilise direct and associative references to identity. The paper conceptualises the processes involved in venue operation through the notion of inducement, and it discusses the spatial, material, performative and representational practices in the creation of hospitality experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between identity and hospitality experiences is well documented. Previous work by anthropologists and geographers has examined how transactions of hospitality, involving food, drink, offers of shelter and social interaction may be used to express identity, status and power (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Selwyn, 2000; Wilson, 2005). Research has also considered how providers in commercial contexts manipulate the servicescape and mobilise signifiers of identity and cultural values to communicate with customers, direct their behaviour and shape their consumption experiences (Lin, 2004; Lugosi, 2009; O'Mahony, Hall, & Binney, 2006). However, this paper posits that current work examining the relationship between identity, hospitality and the management

of operations offers limited understanding of how identities and associated cultural values are 'experientialised' i.e. how symbolically laden, emotionally charged, immersive, multi-sensory experiences that draw on notions of identity and culture as guiding reference points emerge or operate in venues. The paper considers social scientific literature considering the interactions of hospitality and identity, drawn from the disciplines of geography, sociology and anthropology, and literature on hospitality experience management. It is argued that the former body of work offers numerous insights into the mobilisation of cultural values and the articulation of identities within hospitality settings, but does not consider management issues. Conversely, experience management literature examines such related issues as theming, but does not provide adequate insights into how cultural values and notions of identities are incorporated into experience production.

The paper draws on empirical data to demonstrate how particular constructions of identity intersect with notions of ethnicity, nationality, gender, class and sexuality in creating hospitality

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experiences. It is argued that the experientialisation of identity involves the selective reconstruction and mobilisation of culturally specific expressions of values and behaviours by the operators, and it also involves consumers' performances of selves and their identification with or against particular notions of identity. It is important to stress that this paper is not concerned with hospitality and subjective experiences of identity i.e. how consumers feel about or relate to particular discourses of self. Rather, it focuses on how discourses of identity are distilled, juxtaposed and mobilised as organisational resources.

The paper's approach is broadly in the actor-network theory (ANT) tradition (Latour, 2005; Lugosi & Erdélyi, 2009; Van der Duim, Ren, & Jóhannesson, 2013). ANT as a methodology seeks to examine the actors, actions, processes and relationships through which things come into being (Latour, 2005). There are three principal areas of interest within this perspective relevant to the current study: first, the different human and non-human *actors* or *actants*; second, *enactments* i.e. how actors/actants and their networks of relationships perform knowledge and agency, resulting in particular outcomes; and *enrolment*, i.e. how various (human and non-human) actors/actants are mobilised within these enactments or performances.

This paper examines a hospitality/tourism venue/event called *The Church* which has been operating since 1979, and it accounts for the practices and processes through which management and consumers co-create notions of identity and culture through the experience. The paper conceptualises the processes involved in venue operation through the notion of *inducement*, and it discusses the spatial, material, performative and representational practices in the creation of hospitality experiences. It is argued that identifying specific practices of inducement within this research context helps to construct a broader thematic framework for understanding how identities may be entangled and mobilised within hospitality experiences in other contexts. By doing so, this paper, therefore, responds to emerging calls to examine critically the relationship between identity and spatial dimensions of hospitality (e.g. Lugosi, 2009; Lynch, Germann Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011) by mapping the entanglement of material, embodied, representational and symbolic practices in the production of space. This contributes to knowledge in two key ways: first, it broadens our understanding of the processes through which particular spaces are created or rendered hospitable. It thus contributes to current work examining the nature of hospitality in contemporary society and how it operates in different social contexts (cf. Lugosi, 2009; Lynch et al., 2011). Second, it builds upon and advances our understanding of experience management (cf. Gilmore & Pine, 2002; O'Mahony et al., 2006) by offering a context-sensitive conception of the complex processes of co-creation through which hospitality experiences are constructed.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The experience paradigm and hospitality operations management

Experiential consumption and its management have emerged as central themes in conceptualisations of contemporary hospitality (cf. Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Hemmington, 2007; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011a). There are various debates concerning the definition of experiences, but a reoccurring set of themes are that experiential consumption is multi-sensory, with a significant emotional component, involving affective engagement between the consumer and organisation and between consumers (Morgan, Lugosi, & Ritchie, 2010; Morgan, Watson, & Hemmington, 2008; Walls et al., 2011a). Moreover, because such experiences are

symbolically laden and thus meaningful to consumers, they are actively involved in the construction of the experience through pre-consumption desire, fantasy, anticipation, preparation as well as contribution during the experience, and remembering and story-telling afterwards (Lugosi, 2007; Morgan et al., 2010; Watson, Morgan, & Hemmington, 2008). Experiential consumption can also be thought of as occurring outside of, and often in contrast to, mundane, everyday experiences (Hanefors & Mossberg, 2003), although consumer experiences are inevitably multidimensional and involve a series of functional aspects that underpin peak experiences (Quan & Wang, 2004).

There is also a growing body of work that has explored the management of experiential consumption in hospitality (see e.g. Gibbs & Ritchie, 2010; Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Walls et al., 2011a). Experience management has drawn on the principles of theatre and drama (Morgan et al., 2008; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and is informed by Goffman's (1990) dramaturgical conception of the world. This dramaturgical perspective conceives the social world through notions of visible front stages and hidden back stages, with social actors continually engaged in micro-dramas – performing roles, following scripts and using props, with audiences receiving and responding to these performances. This approach to experience management also involves a dramatic structure or structuring, implying a journey with a beginning, middle and end, with various preconceived high/low-points facilitated by the organisation (Zomerdiijk & Voss, 2010).

A key feature in discussions of experience management that directly relates to notions of culture and identity is theming (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Zomerdiijk & Voss, 2010). As Brown and Patterson (2000, p. 656) argued, the theming of venues attempts to 'capture the essence of a phenomenon'; in other words, it is an essentialisation of identity and cultural values. Mobilising notions of identity within theming thus reflects what Beardsworth and Bryman (1999, pp. 248–249) called 'quasification' – creating experiential spaces that operate 'as if they were something other', which involves borrowing various essentialised meta-narratives of identity and culture.

Organisations have been encouraged to create compelling narratives for their offerings that consumers can relate to on a personal level and in which they can immerse themselves (cf. Pine & Gilmore, 2008; Zomerdiijk & Voss, 2010). These values are reflected in the entire organisational value-chain and are underpinned by the careful 'staging' and management of the consumer-organisation interaction (Morgan et al., 2008). The manipulation of the servicescape and the strategic use of atmospherics create 'clues' for customers that guide their expectations and perceptions, and shape their behaviours (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006; Hoffman & Turley, 2002; Zomerdiijk & Voss, 2010). Music, general noise, colours, lighting, textures, fittings, decorations, furnishing and layout influence perceptions of space and shape emotional responses; they can affect the rate of consumption, facilitate or hinder social interaction, and encourage people to engage with or reject spaces (cf. Grayson & McNeill, 2009; Lin, 2004, 2010). This is complemented by the service staff whose aesthetic capital, emotional labour and embodied performances of self are intertwined in the experiential proposition (Gibbs & Ritchie, 2010).

The emphasis of the experience management approach is on control and orchestration of customer experiences (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994). It has been criticised for being superficial and excessively production centric; and subsequently, the emphasis has shifted to co-creation: the active engagement of multiple, inter-dependent stakeholders (consumers, managers and employees) in creating value (Chathoth, Altinay, Harrington, Okumus, & Chan, 2013; Morgan et al., 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011; Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). Co-

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