



Understanding the travel experience and its impact on attitudes, emotions and loyalty towards the transportation provider—A quantitative study with mid-distance bus trips



Rui Carreira^{a,*}, Lia Patrício^a, Renato Natal Jorge^a, Chris Magee^b

^a Faculty of Engineering, University of Porto, rua Dr. Roberto Frias, s/n, 4200-465 Porto, Portugal

^b Engineering Systems Division, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA

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ABSTRACT

Enhancing the travel experience has become a crucial consideration for transportation companies to promote differentiation and customer loyalty. Therefore, transport planners, providers and manufacturers in general are becoming aware of the significance of understanding the passenger experience better, in order to improve transit policies, management and vehicles. The holistic perspective of the travel experience is conceptualized as involving: (1) a thorough set of passenger internal responses (e.g. cognitive and emotional) that are driven by experience factors, some of which are (2) aspects that are not in complete control of the transportation provider, such as waiting areas or the social environment, during (3) all the moments before, throughout and after the trip. Although transportation research has studied the different aspects of transportation quality, empirical studies with such a broad approach to the travel experience and its impact on loyalty are still scarce.

This article takes a scale development approach to conceptualize, develop and test a multiple-item scale for measuring the travel experience from the defined holistic perspective, analyzing its perceptual dimensions and outcomes based on a quantitative study with 1226 passengers of a mid-distance bus transportation service. The travel experience scale demonstrates good psychometric properties and consists of 28 items aggregated into seven dimensions or experience factors: individual space, information provision, staff's skills, social environment, vehicle maintenance, off-board facilities, and ticket line service.

The study shows that all seven experience factors have a significant impact on customer cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses to the transportation service, highlighting the importance of a broad approach to the study and management of the travel experience. The classical dimensions of individual comfort and vehicle maintenance are the ones with the strongest impact on experience outcomes, showing that transportation providers should maintain a strong focus on providing a good core service. However, other factors such as the social environment have an influence on emotions, which in turn affect loyalty to the transportation provider. These results show the need for a careful study and management of the different aspects of the travel experience, and an integrated design and management of the transport system as a whole.

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1. Introduction

Enabling superior customer experience in general has become a key factor for companies to promote differentiation and customer loyalty (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Carbone and Haeckel, 1994; Berry et al., 2002). Meyer and Schwager (2007) define customer experience as “the internal and subjective response customers have to

any direct or indirect contact with a company”. According to Verhoef et al. (2009), the customer experience is holistic in nature because it is formed by different customer internal responses (e.g. emotional and cognitive), that are driven by perceptions of the service provided such as service interface, or retail atmosphere. From this perspective (Verhoef et al., 2009) the customer experience involves aspects that are not in complete control of the provider (e.g. social environment), and also all moments of contact with a company, not only during actual service provision, but also before and after. Moreover the customer experience influences customer loyalty behaviors such as repeat business and word of mouth (Heskett et al., 2008). Building on those concepts,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +351 225081719; fax: +351 225081538.

E-mail addresses: ruicar@fe.up.pt (R. Carreira), lpatric@fe.up.pt (L. Patrício), natal@fe.up.pt (R. Natal Jorge), cmagee@mit.edu (C. Magee).

Carreira et al. (2013a) define experience factors (EFs) as the perceptions of the service provided, which influence experience components (ECs), defined as customer cognitive, sensorial and emotional responses. These authors (Carreira et al., 2013a) identified travel EFs and ECs using an in-depth qualitative approach that consisted of observations, semi-structured interviews to mid-distance bus passengers and their content analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Neuman, 2006).

Previous studies (Zomerdijsk and Voss, 2009) of leading transport companies such as Royal Caribbean and Virgin Atlantic have shown that the customer experience is considered central to the transport service provision. These operators focus on the careful sensory design of the vehicle physical environment, and especially focus on the interaction of customers with service employees through all service encounters.

However, the travel experience has been researched very rarely (e.g. Carreira et al., 2013a; Carreira et al., 2013b). Transport research has most often evaluated transit service quality based on passenger cognitive expectations and perceptions of “traditional” core transportation attributes such as comfort or safety (e.g. Stradling et al., 2007b, Nathanail, 2008; de Oña et al., 2012; Eboli and Mazzulla, 2012a; Geetika, 2010; Joewono and Kubota, 2007; Habib et al., 2011; Tyrinopoulos and Aifadopoulou, 2008, de Oña et al., 2013). When compared to traditional service quality, the customer experience is more complex and holistic in nature, because it involves not only cognitive, but also emotional components and it is extended in time from the first until the last contact between the customer and the transportation provider. Moreover the customer experience is influenced by a wide set of EFs (Pullman and Gross, 2004; Price et al., 1995; Patrício et al., 2009), some of which are not directly controlled by the provider (e.g. social environment) or are dependent on

technology advancements (e.g. information provision) (Carreira et al., 2013a). These EFs involve both *what* is offered, such as functionality, and *how* it is offered, such as the social environment (Patrício et al., 2008). Understanding the customer travel experience therefore requires an approach that addresses its different aspects in an integrated way.

In an increasingly competitive environment, customer loyalty is a key success factor for service providers, particularly to those in the transport sector, but satisfaction does not necessarily indicate that the customer will be loyal to the company (Oliver, 1999). Taking a holistic perspective to study the travel experience can provide a more complete view of how to design the vehicles and the transportation systems, and specifically how to manage public transportation policies and services in order to promote passenger loyalty behaviors. Following a scale development approach (Churchill, 1979; Gerbing and Anderson, 1988), this paper develops and tests a scale to measure the travel experience performing a quantitative study with 1226 bus passengers. Based on Carreira et al. (2013a) qualitative results, the travel experience concept is defined as well as its domain from which scale items are drawn to define the preliminary scale which consists of the travel EFs. This study also analyzes the impact of EFs on ECs (i.e. passenger cognitive and emotional responses) that influence loyalty behaviors, as shown in Fig. 1. Taking this model into account, the antecedents of travel experience are the specific service attributes – such as actual travel time from origin to destination – that originate customer perceptions. In turn perceptions, such as perceived travel time, are aggregated into more abstract perceptual dimensions (i.e. Experience Factors). The grey area in Fig. 1 represents the perceptual levels at which the travel experience evaluation happens, as defined by Parasuraman et al. (2005).

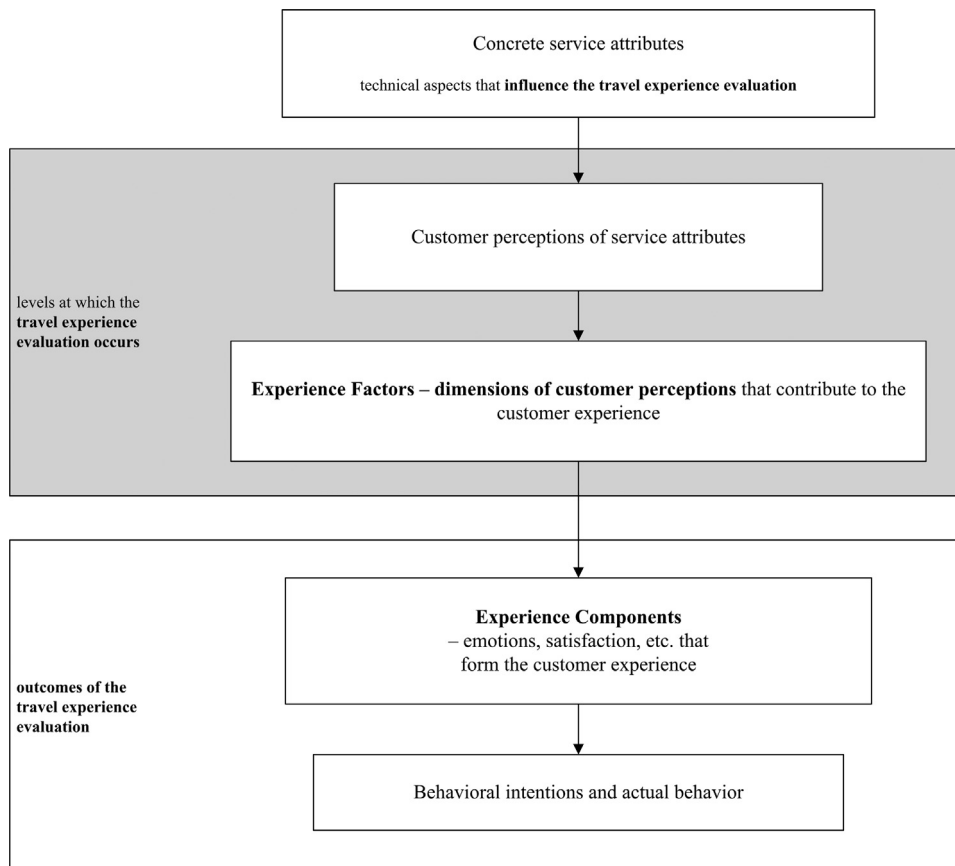


Fig. 1. Travel experience creation model (adapted from Parasuraman et al. (2005)).

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