



# Situational liminality: Mis-managed consumer experience in liquid modernity



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## KEYWORDS

Abduction;  
Disambiguation;  
Experience economy;  
Experience mismanagement;  
Liquid modernity;  
Overkill of experience;  
Situational liminality;  
Self-reflective inquiry

**Abstract** The purpose of the paper is to explore experience economy events from an abductive interpretivist perspective. The empirical part of the study is based on the self-reflective anthropologic inquiry method. This study sets out to propose that the awkwardness and setback experienced by the client, customer or visitor, may generate his/her agency to establish a more clear-cut construction of the experiential framework. However, if attempted the disambiguation demands significant emotional and, sometimes, physical labour, typically not undertaken willingly, and potentially resulting in the subject's avoidance of exposure to similar experiences in future. Introducing the notion of 'situational liminality', the paper re-focuses the critical edge of inquiry away from agency-reducing aspects of experience economy, towards reflecting on their enforced, albeit not deliberate, agency-inducing consequences. By exploring the 'liquid' underpinnings of situational liminality, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion on liquid modernity in organizational context.

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## Introduction

Given the third sector's preponderance in the developed world economies and Pine and Gilmore's (1999) widely acknowledged emphasis on the experiential aspect of service provision, experience economy is a topical issue for management theorists and practitioners. In this respect, services rendered in supermarkets, long distance trains, banks, post offices or food courts are expected to not only fulfil their basic functions (travel, communication, access to financial resources) but also go beyond them: enabling to relax, ensuring pleasant waiting time, providing satisfactory shopping experience or prompt and reliable exchange of information. However, while experience may be the new economic offering (Pine & Gilmore, 1999),

this study will explore its dark side emerging due to frustration, confusion and despondency of clients, visitors or customers. Expecting to contribute new insights to critical research on experience economy, the study will explore the agency-inducing (rather than limiting) aspects of multifaceted failures to provide positive experience from the viewpoint of the recipient. Using the self-reflective inquiry, and in the spirit of abductive interpretivism, the paper will scrutinize the experiential framework for mis-managed experience introducing the notion of *situational liminality* for the potential benefit of organizational practitioners and theorists. Since Zygmunt Bauman's timely reflection on 'liquidity' of the modern world provides a suitable background for exploring the liminality in the experiential sphere of economic exchanges, the study attempts to endow the current discussions on liquid modernity in organizational context (e.g. Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2014) with a new perspective and conceptual input. Before the empirical case studies are presented and discussed, the theoretical background of inquiry (liminality, experience economy

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and liquid modernity) is introduced and the methodology explained. The paper's contribution is captured through an abductive hypothesis the implications of which are discussed in the final part of the work.

## Theoretical context

### Liminality

The blurring of boundaries between organization and the outside world (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003), other organizations (Tempest & Starkey, 2004), as well as between work and private sphere (Hochschild, 1997), invite the reflection on the nowadays fleeting, liquid nature of social reality as such (Bauman, 2001). In 'liquid modernity' the constant 'uprootedness' of social actors and crossing the pre-established boundaries, be it in private or institutional arena, becomes the new norm (Bauman, 2000). This fluidity, not-belongingness to neither of the two spaces, institutions or groups, is increasingly perceived in terms of assuming the liminal status.

'Liminal' originally meant a threshold in the physical sense—the bottom part of a doorway that must be crossed when entering a building; its current meaning is typically psychological: "a threshold below which a stimulus is not perceived or is not distinguished from another" (OED, accessed on 17/06/12). The notion of liminality was first introduced to the field of anthropology as 'a liminal period', the middle part of a ritual of marriage—the stage of transition following the 'separation' from the initial social context and preceding the 'reassimilation' into society upon the endowment of the new status (van Gennep, 1909/2004). This concept was further developed in the 1960s and 1970s by Turner (1967, p. 95), whose work focused on the 'social ambiguity' and 'structural invisibility' of the subject during the liminal period. The 'liminality' was perceived as the negation of "all positive structural assertions [and simultaneously], in some sense, the source of them all" (op. cit., p. 97). In a similar vein, Turner (1969, p. 95) asserts that 'liminal individuals' are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony". Hence, liminality may be perceived as an anti-structure, but it may also become the source of the emerging structure, just as chaos may precede an order. Liminality appears where distinctions merge and blur (Turner, 1982), which is where the social ambiguity steps in—a lack of definition validating the social structure means that in the liminal phase people have no rights over others. This ambiguous social space is associated with freedom and creativity (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). The liminal community can also appear, however, instead of identity, it will be mediated by 'the shared sense of alterity', which seems to be the uniting principle of 'the liminal organization' (ibid.). The latter may share all physical and legal boundaries with a 'proper' work organization, but, as Czarniawska and Mazza in their study of consultants' work indicate, its virtual space is *experienced* differently by different organizational actors (ibid.). The consultants may be perceived as originators of organizational ambiguity—not only the nature of their occupation (moving in and out), but also its results (the temporary suspension of, at least, some organizational mechanisms) contribute to the liminality of organizational space. The role of other organizational

groups may be similar—e.g. the communities created by temporary workers (Garsten, 1999). Rottenburg interestingly extends the notion of liminality to include places—physical spaces (in this case: a café, which in the evening transforms into a bar and ends up as a discotheque), in which established categories work only temporarily, their validity is as transitory as are conceptualizations created by people involved in a given social context (2000). Hence the aporia created by the liminal space—classifications are impossible, just as much as avoiding the process of classifying (ibid.).

Liminality may be associated with the newly acquired freedom of expression, improvisation, manipulation (Zabusky & Barley, 1997) and creativity (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2004) as well as with the suspension of institutional routines of rationality, which creates the room for political agendas, such as 'issue selling', building the 'power map' and identifying allies (Sturdy, Schwartz, & Spicer, 2006). Using the dialogical perspective, it may also be perceived as contributing to identity reconstruction of people in organizations (Beech, 2011). However, it is also argued that liminality can easily be turned into an unsettling experience (Newell, Tansley, & Wagner, 2008) or at least one involving uncertainty regarding the definition of the given social context (Rottenburg, 2000). Cunha and Cabral-Cardoso (2006) and Guimarães-Costa and Cunha (2009) underlined the uncertain and unsettling aspect of liminality by examining the illegality of actions undertaken within organizations and the roles of international managers, respectively. In both cases the discrepancy between general rules and their application in specific situations evoked the dilemma inducing certain activity on the part of actors involved: the decision to be made. The unsettling and agency-inducing aspects of liminality will be further explored in the current study.

### Experience economy

The basic rationale behind the concept of experience economy is that not only did agricultural and industrial economies fail to deliver unique goods, but also services are increasingly perceived by customers as an undifferentiated mass, much akin to such products as jeans trousers or bread. However, expertly staging the customer's *experience* enables differentiating between similar goods and services—after all the subtitle of Pine and Gilmore's (1999) seminal book reads "work is a theatre and every business a stage".

While building the customer relationship through offering an array of products and services was once perceived as viable strategy (Peppers & Rogers, 1993), such 'relationship' appears to remain fragile unless emotional linkages are made (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Hence, the affective aspects of service experience (such as 'trust' see Hawes, Mast, & Swan, 1989; Swan, Trawick, Rink, & Roberts, 1988) are increasingly deemed crucial to customer-to-business relationships (Fournier, Dobscha, & Mick, 1998) and become a standalone focus of empirical studies (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Even if the experience side of consumption was certainly not an entirely new discovery (e.g. see Laverie, Kleine, & Schultz-Kleine, 1993), for Pine and Gilmore experiences become a distinct economic offering—as distinct from services as services are from goods (1998). In the experience economy value for the consumer no longer comes from the product (material) or service (material or immaterial); it comes from the experience derived from consuming them.

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