Service Experience on Tourism: A Customer Journey View

Abstract

Service researchers have emphasized the importance of analyzing the service experience, encompassing multiple service encounters. Although studies of service encounters have increased, the scope of research in this space remains narrow. Specifically, service research has traditionally concentrated on understanding, measuring, and optimizing the core service delivery. We present a framework to guide comprehensive service experience research on tourism. Broadly, we define the relationship between the (1) pre-core service encounter, (2) core service encounter, and (3) post-core service encounter and the interaction with servicescape and memorability. Further, we put forward essential research propositions to be addressed within and across these periods. Finally, we argue that researchers need to consider simultaneously all periods of the service experience to make valuable contributions to the literature.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism and travel experiences "*often extend well beyond temporary sojourns and the consumption of place*" (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2018, p.131). A holistic experience approach with coordination of the prior, during, and after trip phases is critical (e.g., Prebensen, Vitterso, & Dahl, 2013). This includes customer-to-customer interaction and extra-role positive behavior, like sharing the experience among family, friends, strangers, or the company itself (Jansson, 2018; McCabe & Stokoe, 2010). The global expansion of media tech-savvy travelers urges tourism and hospitality organizations to compete fiercely for tourists' expenditure and aspects of customer citizenship behavior, such as share of voice and mind (Park & Nicolau, 2016). To meet this goal, tourism and hospitality organizations are increasingly adopting the logic of value co-creation (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2015; Rihova, Buhalis, Gouthro, & Moital, 2018; Rihova, Buhalis, Moital, & Gouthro, 2015).

The focus of service research for the past three decades has often been on understanding, measuring, and optimizing the core service delivery and ensuring that the moments when the customer is "in the factory" are perceived as being excellent. However, what happens leading up to the core and after the core has received less attention.

We argue that this narrowed focus on the core service delivery has caused service researchers and managers not fully to recognize evolving customer needs for a holistic service experience, which spans all potential service encounters (or touchpoints) with the firm. In this absence, service scholars may be overlooking opportunities to enhance the service experience. As a result, our research discipline runs the risk of painting an incomplete picture of the service experience. By taking a holistic view of the customer experience (pre-core-post), firms may be able to strengthen relationships with their most valuable customers and, in turn, increase customer retention, positive word-of-mouth, and profitability (Voorhees et al., 2017).

Recent research conceptualized customer experience "as a customer's journey with a firm overtime during the purchase cycle across multiple touchpoints" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 6). Thus, managers and researchers must not focus solely on the core service providers to truly understand

how service firms can build and maintain lasting relationships. Other authors have also recently called for research on the enhancement of service experiences (Gustafsson et al., 2015; Ostrom et al., 2015) and an inclusive view of all touchpoints within a service experience (Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, & Tse, 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Although this prior work has been foundational for service marketing, these previous reviews stop short of providing a critical review of research outside the lens of the core service encounter. A framework that integrates pre-core, core, and post-core service encounters is still needed.

The current article strives to address this gap by focusing on reviewing and expanding the definitions of service encounter, by giving more attention to the "pre-core" and "post-core" periods, and by discussing the interdependencies" between the three encounter periods.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Pre-Visit Stage

Before travel, a traveler might first have a travel motivation in his/her mind (Zhang, 2020). This idea generation can be triggered by travel advertisements or a peer's travel experience, which was shared within his or her social circles (Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Once a travel motivation is established, the prospective traveler continues gathering information through the Internet and conversations with peers (Weigert, 2018). The traveler will search for related information through the Internet or peer recommendations. After thoroughly researching a destination, the traveler can then book flights, accommodations, and any potential guided tours, which are categorized as anchors or major travel decisions during the journey (Hwang et al., 2013). Sometimes, shared accommodations (Zhang et al., 2018), such as Airbnb, are chosen instead of traditional lodging facilities (i.e., hotels and resorts). During the pre-visit stage, co-creation may occur when the traveler contacts travel agencies for further information or requests a personalized travel package (Laesser et al., 2019).

Face-to-face pre-purchase research, post-purchase feedback, website, and social media technologies have changed e-commerce into social commerce (Rezaei et al., 2021; Liberato et al.,

2018). Companies are increasingly developing technology platforms to allow interaction between customers and businesses (VO, Chovancova, & Tri, 2019). According to Al-Khayyal, Alshurideh, Al Ckurdi, & Aburayya (2020), website design is essential for electronic service quality. They address a memorable remark on navigation, information search, ordering processing, product and service availability, price and discount offerings, privacy, security, personalization, and system availability. To understand the reality of online business, VO, Chovancova, & Tri, (2019, p.1) remark that "following the progress of online markets, hotel and tourism industries have quickly transformed the e-commerce from understanding the market to influencing the customers' choices by advanced information technology". Nowadays, people "connects to everything technological, digital and online, and use these tools before (phase of the search of the places to visit and consequent decision making) during (phase of the trip itself to communicate with the rest of the community: photos of the sites and posts) and after their trips (evaluate and comment about the products and services consumed during their travels)" co-creating value (Liberato, Liberato, Abreu, Alen, & Rocha, 2018 pp.274). Consumers have benefited from using mobile social media, applications, and websites to research products and services (Rezaei, Hajli, Gbadamosi, Aghaali, & Featherman, 2021). Tourists utilize all available ways of transmission, with a high focus on medium and online platforms to create value. These channels and platforms include online forums, specified websites, apps, and various social networks (Tesshusa, 2020), to research and create value with their whole experience.

The website quality is fundamental to attracting customers' first impressions, satisfaction, engagement behaviors, and loyalty intentions (VO, Chovancova, & Tri, 2019). Web 2.0 and social platforms' resurgence have provided new opportunities for new businesses and interactions, encouraging users to get involved and generate content electronically (Meilatinova, N., 2021). The increased use of Web 2.0 technologies has changed the way businesses operate and how to do business in the digital world (Mahadin, Akroush, & Bata, 2020). Online customer engagement and technology have been linked to value co-creation conceptualization, and they are the co-creators of value or experiences through the delivery process (Zhang, Lu, Torres, & Chen, 2018).

Value Co-Creation (Core Stage)

Given the lack of knowledge customers' willingness to participate in the electronic co-creation experience, some studies suggest the research on the attitude toward the website and its behavioral intention co-creation experience (Elsharnouby et al., 2015; Liberato et al., 2018). Technology should be used in the dynamic co-creation of experiences (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012). Today, tourists and hospitality customers rely aggressively on online and mobile technologies in their pre-and post-trip information gathering and decision-making process (Sthapit, Del Chiappa, Coudounaris, & Bjork, 2020).

According to service-dominant logic, also known as S-D Logic, or service-dominant sense, the customer is always the co-creator of value, postulated as inherently interactional and phenomenological (Lusch, Vargo & Wessels, 2008). The critical piece is that the value in co-creation is not only brought by the service provider to the customer but arises through an exchange between both parties (Ruiz-Alba et al., 2019). Alternatively, Grönroos (2011) agrees that from the perspective of service in business (service logic), customers are not the only co-creators of value since, under certain situations, the service provider can co-create value together with the customer, thus achieving a healthy, reciprocal, and loyal relationship.

Value co-creation has been defined and associated with several areas, e.g., experience, value, knowledge, and product co-creation (Ruiz-Alba et al., 2019). It has also attracted scholars' and researchers' attention as a general concept describing relationships between multiple parties (Ranjan and Read, 2016). Tourism literature refers to the co-creation experience as the journey that supplies value to customers. A suitable experience environment eases customer interaction, and contact with others helps co-create personalized experiences (Kallmuenzer, Peters, & Buhalis, 2020). Nowadays, hospitality customers are considered the co-creators of their journey (Sthapit, Del Chiappa, Coudounaris, & Bjork, 2020). Online consumers can give ideas and feedback to online firms. They "use all the available means of communication, especially the communication channels and online platforms, specialized websites and apps, and several social networks, to share their experiences with others" (Liberato, Liberato, Abreu, Alen, & Rocha, 2018, pp.264). While traveling, they engage (create value) with their friends, family, and others through posts and

pictures on social media (Tesshusa, 2020). People on vacations create their experiences based on their personal preferences, interactions with other people, and previous technology research. If the argument is profitable, the consumer helps to co-create value, resulting in higher market share and economic profitability (Rezaei, Hajli, Gbadamosi, Aghaali, & Featherman, 2021). For other authors, the context of tourism stipulates that co-creation is somewhat relevant, as it is based on creating and sharing experiences while maintaining competitiveness (Chang et al., 2020). In other words, they present that co-creation adds a dimension to trust and commitment that explains the relationship between the service provider and the customer. Previously, different approaches pointed to the relationship of selling products, but currently, a movement suggests the sale of solutions and is represented by the concept of servitization (Ruiz-Alba et al., 2019). This concept refers to packages that combine products, services (relationships), support, self-service, and knowledge. In other words, servitization implies a value co-creation process (Ruiz-Alba et al., 2019).

According to Greer et al. (2015), value co-creation is defined as customer participation during an exchange. Consumers co-create value from services and contribute mentally, physically, and emotionally during service delivery. Some authors have first suggested that the customer be seen as the co-creator of experiences and values (Prahalad et al., 2002). On the other hand, the importance is mentioned about the significant impact of technological advances and media on the possible research areas of value co-creation (Femenia-Serra et al., 2018). Co-creation and absence of information also drive satisfaction, or not, with using the websites for accommodations, orders, and bookings, which affect continuance use intention (Sthapit, Del Chiappa, Coudounaris, & Bjork, 2020). There are debates about the purpose and critical evaluations of value co-creation merit according to the literature. Scholars suggest implementing a method that involves stakeholders (relationships) to provide essential perspectives that foster the study of motivation, ethics, and legitimacy of co-creation approaches (Metz et al., 2019), without leaving aside the study quality in relationships thus achieving loyalty during the course. Cossio-Silva et al. (2016) argue that attitude and behavior are essential variables in the co-creation process and influence attitudinal loyalty. That is, there is a significant relationship between value co-creation and commitment. Customers create value for themselves, other customers, and owners by sharing their experiences with other people (Kallmuenzer, Peters, & Buhalis, 2020), including WOM and social

platforms. On the other hand, it cannot be overlooked that co-destruction should be contemplated and studied in the future, as it may arise from employees' rude behaviors (relationships), technological failures (technology), and customers' revenge desires (Zhang et al., 2018), thus affecting loyalty between the parties.

Customer Citizenship Behavior (Post-Visit Stage)

Customer citizenship behavior is defined as "voluntary and discretionary behaviors that are not required for the successful production or delivery of the service but that, in the aggregate, help the service organization overall" (Groth, 2005, p.11).

After travel, tourists usually conduct follow-up feedback, such as writing reviews and comments on their experience or posting and submitting travel photos, texts, or videos to their social circles (Laesser et al., 2019). These activities can be co-created when the traveler contacts travel service providers directly for help or feedback. For a broader scope of value co-creation, travel reviews, experience sharing, and recommendations could also be regarded as co-creating efforts between travelers and other potential travelers (Zhang, 2020).

Customer citizenship behavior provides significant benefits to firms, the customers themselves and other customers. For instance, organizational performance is improved by customer citizenship behavior through enhanced relationships among participants in the service encounter (Yi, Nataraajan, & Gong, 2011). It adds value to customers by increasing the sense of belonging and being useful, providing relief from friends and relatives or other duties, social interaction by assisting and meeting other customers, dealing with employees in a respectful manner and assisting staff and consumers without anticipating any direct reward (Rihova et al., 2015; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Experiencescape

In terms of hospitality organizations, the process of co-creation experience generation starts from the interaction between customers and the elements of the experiencescape, such as the physical

environment (e.g., layout, equipment, local culture, food, etc.) and the interpersonal dimensions (e.g., C2C interaction, the hospitality of employee, etc.) (Pizam & Tasci, 2019). Then, the customer becomes a producer, creating value with more beneficial service and memorable experiences (Chathoth et al., 2016; Mody et al., 2017; Prebensen et al., 2013). A higher evaluation of the experiencescape would contribute to a higher level of perceived value (i.e., value co-created by customer and experiencescape), which further contributes to individuals' memorability.

Experiencescape originates from the term 'servicescape' under consumer-centrism (Edvardsson, Enquist, & Johnston, 2010). Experiencescape refers to sensory, functional, social, natural, and cultural stimuli in a service encounter embedded in a culture of hospitality (Bitner, 1992; Pizam & Tasci, 2019). In the formation of co-creation experiences, experiencescape is the background and stimuli that integrate physical aspects of the environment, social actors, and participants.

Memorability

Memorability is usually seen in tourism literature as subjective; it refers to a personal ability to maintain and recall information (Saket, Endert, & Stasko, 2016) or to the subjective feeling that one will remember something in the future (Zimmerman & Kelley, 2010).

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Figure 1 presents the graphical conceptual framework from which the following research questions are derived.
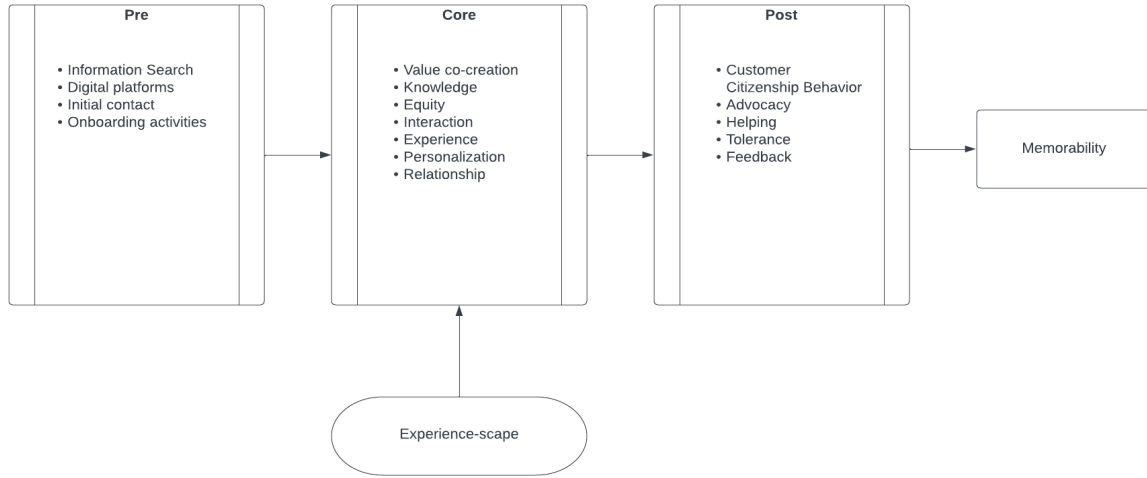
Figure 1: Service Experience in Tourism - A Customer Journey

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While there has been extensive research on information search, questions remain unanswered about the pre, core, and post-service experience. While prior research has captured each critical period in isolation, much less is known about its role in connecting the pre-core and post-core encounters and how these should match to create a seamless service experience and memorability in customers. Our propositions in this research are as follows:

P1. The pre-service experience of the customer impacts the core service experience.

P2. The core service experience of the customer impacts the post-visit experience.

P3. The service experience in the pre, core, and post-experience impact the memorability of the customer

P4. The experience-scape impact the core experience of the customer.

TESTABLE FRAMEWORK

Based on this discussion, we will test the proposed model and propositions predicting the relative levels of resources that firms should invest in the three stages of the service encounter. We will be

operationalizing the key drivers that explain each phase of the service encounters through a questionnaire.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the service discipline evolves, researchers must expand their lens beyond the core experience. Historically, researchers have obsessed over the core service encounter, and decades of research have informed optimization efforts for those moments when the customer is "in the factory." While these investments have resulted in gains in service excellence, they have also resulted in the form of service myopia, with too much emphasis on the core service encounters and not enough focus on the pre-core and post-core encounters. Specifically, by narrowly focusing on the core, researchers are missing opportunities to apply service theories and principles to the pre-and post-core encounters, where best-in-class firms are already beginning to differentiate. Ultimately, without widening our lens, service research runs the risk of becoming less relevant in the future.

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