
Editorial

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1 Introduction

The intangible and variable nature of service performances and the implications created thereof have long been debated in the literature, with extensive research undertaken in the field of service quality. During the last years, however, academic and practitioner literature is increasingly shifting its focus on the concept of customer experience (Berry et al., 2002; Verhoef et al., 2009). Nevertheless, in spite of the knowledge body which is

developing, there is no consensus as to how the construct is defined (Carù and Cova, 2003; Gentile et al., 2007) nor on the elements that create the customer experience (Berry et al., 2002; Gentile et al., 2007; Meyer and Schwager, 2007). In addition, there is lack of consensus as to how the concept should be investigated; various researchers (e.g., Berry et al., 2002; Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Verhoef et al., 2009) emphasise the need to examine how experiences are designed and delivered, while more recently attention is placed upon customer participation, engagement and co-creation of the experience (e.g., Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2016; Heinonen et al., 2010; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015).

In parallel, researchers in tourism have embraced the new concept, coined as experiential tourism. Experiential tourism focuses on understanding how customers experience, i.e., sense, relate and act, tourist products (Prentice, 2001; Smith, 2005; 2006). This experience includes prior to departure planning, the experience during the consumption of the tourist product, and post-consumption follow-up. The actual consumption of the tourist product spans over a number of service encounters including the visited places, the people with whom they interact, the activities that one participates in, and the memories created. Hence, tourism literature treats destinations as a series of experiences, delivered over time which can result in lasting memories (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Prentice, 2001).

The distinct approaches to the conceptualisation of customer experience, however, also present a challenge for the tourism field. In this regard, comprehending tourist experience comprises a difficult system of analysing and interpreting tourist perceptions, emotions, actions and re-actions. Moreover, motivational determinants and experiential characteristics of tourists, in conjunction to the various types of tourist activities, practices and destinations, compose a mosaic of tourists' experiences that is difficult to be determined and conceptualised fully. Furthermore, as the tourism sector is characterised by fierce competition and increasingly demanding customers, innovation in tourist products and services becomes central since it can enhance the perceived customer value. As such, during the recent years, innovation products and processes not only have become a desirable component in tourism planning and development, but they comprise the core strategic consideration for policy makers and planners. In this regard, modern theory and practice need to pay more attention to ideas and methodologies related to the innovation in tourist products and services which can enhance the customer experience at all phases of pre, during and post consumption. This is also imperative for the planning and development of competitive destinations that provide a holistic experience to the tourist.

The specific special issue entitled 'Establishing innovative products and processes in tourism: the role of service experience' aims to advance knowledge in the above matter. The issue has been based in its majority, on papers that are revised and expanded versions presented at the 6th International Conference on Tourism (ICOT 2016), International Association for Tourism Policy, Naples, Italy in 29 June to 2 July, 2016. Specifically, the first paper by Risitano et al. proposes a theoretical framework on customer experience in the cruise industry, an industry which has received scant attention in the field. The conceptual paper focuses on atmospheric aspects as key shapers of the customer experience. In particular, it discusses the importance of the environment of the cruise and strengthens the notion that in people-processing services the servicescape assumes a critical role in value delivery. The authors suggest that in order to understand consumer behaviour and incorporate marketing strategies in the cruise environment, attention needs

to be paid on the perceived servicescape, experiential response, and behavioural intentions.

The second paper in the special issue, by Oliveira et al. discusses the mediating role of literary tour guides in Mafra's National Palace, Portugal. As the authors claim, tour guides play an important role on mediating differences between the expectations of visitors, shaped in a large degree in the specific case study by the novel *Baltasar and Blimunda*, by Nobel Prize winner José Saramago, and the cultural reality of the destination. However, this is something challenging for the tour guides. The authors conclude that the use of the contrasting stance as presented by the novel can have a positive impact, since on the one hand it provides to guides a greater discursive freedom and on the other hand it offers to visitors a more differentiated as well as engaging experience.

The third paper by Boukas et al. adopts the policy makers and museums' managers' perspective and investigates customer experience in cultural heritage museums. The authors present a four-dimension experience construct, which includes the substantial role of tourism policy and tourism providers, the museum environment, the museum's employees and the visitor's characteristics. Central to their discussion is the notion of that value creation is a joint effort attained through well-informed visitors, interactive and engaging service processes. This essentially supports the current debate on conceptualising customer experience as a value co-creation process.

Finally, the last paper, even though it was not presented at the ICOT2016 offers a significant insight in the scope of the current special issue. The paper by Vinh and Phuong examines the interrelationships among destination brand image, destination perceived quality, tourist satisfaction and loyalty in the case of Danang City, Vietnam. The authors introduced a conceptual model and concluded that attention should be paid by tourist authorities on the creation of a positive and unique image that appeals to the features of the target consumers and should emphasise the enhancement of service, environmental, and cultural quality of the destination as these are features that are associated to tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

All the above papers in the special issue, provide a significant analysis of how innovative products and processes, emphasising service experience can provide a more fully and complete experience to tourists. Strategies presented in the papers of the issue could help destinations to move towards this direction. Though, the dynamic environment characterised by turbulent external and internal forces, as well as the continuous changes in tourist motivation and behaviour, dictates the continuous monitoring of the service experience in the tourism context, and makes imperative the incorporation of holistic approaches in tourism planning, development and policy making that focus on the provided tourist experience, and the role of the tourist, a necessity. In the new era of intense competition among destinations, innovation is probably the key for the future destinations' success.

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