Competitive Experiences: Lessons from the Tourism Industry

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Abstract

Designing and producing a memorable experience is increasingly seen as a competitive advantage in many industries. This paper suggests some lessons that may be derived from the experiential approach realized in the tourism industry. Three aspects are discussed. Firstly, we discuss the path dependency of experiences and its implications. Secondly, we analyze the ambiguities of the concept of authenticity. Thirdly, we stress the need to maintain a multi-actor approach in designing and performing experiences by pursuing experience bundling and experience co-creation.

Keywords: Experience, Experience economy, Experiential marketing, Authenticity, Co-creation

1. Experience as a Source of Competitive Advantage

In the contemporary competitive landscape, a particular emphasis is placed on companies' ability to provide customers with a distinctive "experience". Designing and performing appropriate experiences is often identified as a decisive competitive advantage.

Management scholars' attention to this aspect is not new. Experiences have been defined in the literature as the transformation process of a product into value for the consumer, and marketing scholars have consistently recognized their importance in determining consumers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or service (Palmer, 2010).

The contemporary focus on experiences originates from the combination of three main changes in the global competitive scenario. Firstly, there are fundamental societal transitions towards a less utilitarian view of consumption to a "post-modern" one, where consumers pursue hedonic gratifications within their social contexts

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Edited by: *Niccolò Cusano University* ISSN: 1593-0319

Bellini, N., Rovai, S. (2025). Competitive Experiences: Lessons from the Tourism Industry. *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unicusano.it)*, (3), 20-31.
https://doi.org/10.4468/2025.1.03bellinirovai

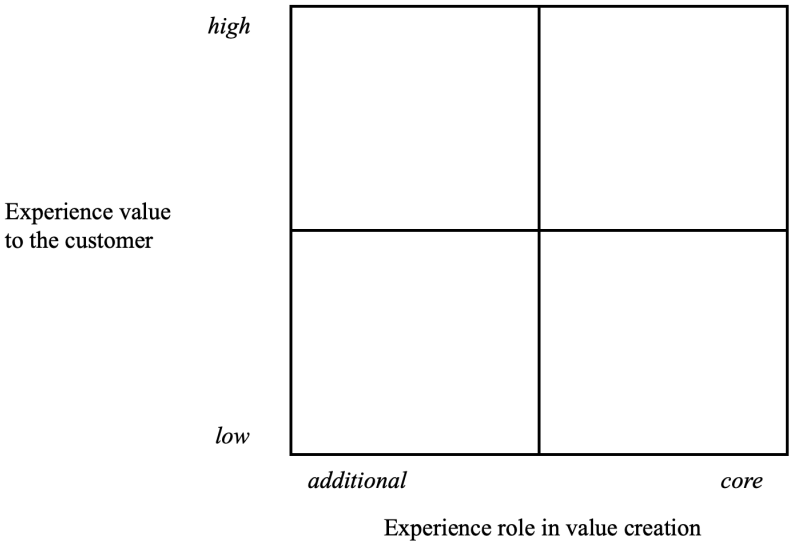
(Carù & Cova, 2006). Secondly, the development of the Internet and of social media produced an unprecedented opportunity to share experiences with levels of speed and spread that were unavailable in traditional word-of-mouth mechanisms. Thirdly, experience production has been "industrialized" by pursuing scale, standardization, and modulization and by combining creativity with technological innovations (Sundbo, 2021).

The seminal works by B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore even identified the experience economy as the newest stage within a history of progression of economic value that evolves from commodities to experiences through the intermediate phases of industrial manufacturing and services (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 2019). A whole new field of study has emerged, and new paradigms have been proposed under the "experience economy studies" label (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013).

The reference to experiences is not limited to specific industries (creative industries, cultural economy, etc.), but is now widespread across the entire spectrum of industries, although the role of experiences in their value propositions is extremely different. As summarized in the matrix (Figure 1), for many manufactured products and services, experiences are in fact an addition to the core product or service that is not linked to its essential features, but to facilitating and supporting elements. Yet, even in those cases, experiences may be of high value to the customer because of their uniqueness, novelty, meaning, etc.

Thus, experiences may be the way to differentiate and, therefore, to increase the value of the product or service to the customer. In other words, they may be the most important factor of competitive advantage when tangible product qualities, service, and relationships are no longer effective differentiators (Palmer, 2010).

Figure 1: *The Matrix of Experience Value*



Source: adapted from (Lorentzen, 2009).

Adopting an experiential approach implies obvious and serious challenges, both conceptually and operationally. Several of the experiential marketing components are reminiscent of well-established service marketing paradigms: the focus on the consumption process and on the "prosumer" role(Chandler & Chen, 2015; Ertz et al., 2024); the different patterns of the provider–customer relationship; the frontstage/backstage design; the personality intensity of the "moments of truth"; the relational role of the frontline staff; etc. (Normann, 2001). The perspective changes, however.

Emotions matter: "The ambiguity for marketers is that on the one hand, experience is a learned outcome that is associated with predictable behaviors, whereas on the other, it has come to be associated with processes whose novelty may result in unpredictable response by consumers" (Palmer, 2010). Furthermore, experiential marketing invites to widening the view on consumer experiences beyond the purchasing phase and to deal with the memories of past experiences (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013).

Notwithstanding the significant advances by theory and practice-oriented research (Batat, 2019a, 2024; Schmitt, 1999), the operationalization of experiential marketing is still problematic, both because of the interaction of many context-specific variables and because of the non-linearity of consumer experiences, which translate into unresolved measurability problems (Palmer, 2010).

This is evident in the reappraisal of the role of atmospherics in physical retail (Farias et al., 2014) and of its connection with the hosting urban context (Pasquinelli & Rovai, 2022), especially for certain products, like in luxury. Stores still respond to the need to "see, feel, touch, and try" and play the role of experiential hubs, while innovative experiences are connected to the implementation of new technologies both in store and online (AI, virtual reality, augmented reality, metaverse, live shopping, etc.) according to the omni-channel approach (Fortuna et al., 2021; Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014; Rovai et al., 2023). Complexity thus arises from the need to design in-store experience according to the consumer's well-being in its various dimensions, from quality of life to hedonism (Eshaghi et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2020; Maggioni et al., 2019).

The contemporary importance of experiences is also based on its apparent lower elasticity. Traditionally, the higher the level of need in Maslow's hierarchy, the greater the relevance of intangible factors was expected to be. Thus, experiences were viewed as belonging to a luxury consumption that would increase or decrease with the customers' income. This is not supported anymore by empirical evidence: "household do not decrease their experience consumption in economic crises and may even continue to increase it" (Sundbo, 2021).

At the same time, however, "luxury brands are becoming synonymous with going the extra mile to create a personalized and memorable experience for consumers" (Gupta et al., 2023). The shift from the luxury of "having" to the luxury of "being" and "doing" (Boston Consulting Group, 2014) marks a radical change in both the product mix that is associated with luxury and with the way marketers are approaching luxury consumers (Batat, 2019b).

In this paper, we would like to outline some of the lessons that tourism may provide to other industries in the design and management of experiences. Tourism is one industry that is most clearly defined by the experiential elements, which are now at the core of the tourist product. In the matrix of Figure 1, tourism is undoubtedly positioned in the upper right quadrant. Tourists "feel good" when they are immersed in a "bubble" that provides them with emotions and takes them away from the constraints and routines of ordinary life. Today, experience design and management are recognized as the decisive competitive factor for both companies and destinations (Frochot & Batat, 2013).

We will focus on three aspects in particular: the characters of the experience that make it memorable and their path dependency; the ambiguous relevance of authenticity; and the challenges of a multi-actor approach in designing and performing experiences.

2. What Makes an Experience Memorable

Experiences cannot always be extraordinary. A tourist may like routines that produce relaxation rather than "wow effects": lying on a sunny beach, a quiet stroll on a mountain path, etc. But of all experiences (either ordinary or unusual), only some are selected, remembered, and communicated, therefore becoming a credible source of "word-of-mouth"(Hosany et al., 2022; Stienmetz et al., 2021; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

The memory of an experience is not just an outcome (positive or negative), but also the precondition of future experiences. It shapes the process of choice, filters the alternatives, defines expectations, and impacts the rational and emotional dimensions of the next experience. In other words, experiences are path-dependent.

Semantics helps. In fact, the word "experience" has two meanings. First, it refers to the direct observation of or participation in events as they take place in space and time. One *lives* an experience. Second, one *has* experience. We refer then to the knowledge and skills that are accumulated over time through a sequence of observations of and participations in events. It is worth mentioning that, while in English, French, Spanish, and Italian the same word refers to both meanings, other languages have two separate words. This happens in German, with the two meanings expressed, respectively, by the words *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013).

The main consequence in tourism management is an emphasis on the subjectivity of tourist experience and on that key stage of the process of appropriation of the experiential environment, which we may label as "tagging". After having acquired familiarity with the context and having perceived and understood (both emotionally and intellectually) the new elements provided in the experience, the tourist "tags" them, i.e., connects them to his/her own experiential assets (Frochot & Batat, 2013). For example, a visit to a winery will provide the tourists with information that will be added and integrated into their previous knowledge about wine and into their prior experiences of winery visits. The tourist may be a connoisseur, an occasional drinker, or just a non-drinker in an

outdoor excursion. Obviously, the same experience (*Erlebnis*) will have a totally different impact on the tourist, based on their starting point (*Erfahrung*).

The tourist will also connect the new elements to their value system. In the "experience society" (Sundbo, 2021), travel experiences are used as "social markers", and they are exposed to signal the individual's social identity, values, beliefs, and aspirations. Tourists' choices are sometimes paradoxical (Bigné & Decrop, 2019), but they aim at self-congruity, and their experiences should match their self-concept (Sirgy, 2018).

The tourist experience, most notably in cultural tourism, is sensitive to the social and cultural background of visitors. For example, the same cultural experiences on a journey to Tuscany will have a very different impact when lived by Anglo-American tourists or by Chinese ones. In the former case, the experience will interact with an old and distinctive familiarity with Tuscan landscapes and culture in art, literature, and cinema; in the latter case, Tuscany is a reference merged into a broader and more approximate perception of Europe and Italy. Nonetheless, the relevance of national cultures cannot be interpreted in a deterministic way, but must take into account other factors, like the level and quality of previous travel experiences, the quality of local relations, individual and collective sensitivities, etc. (Fayard, 2024).

Tourism has also tested the conflicts that originated in and by experiences. A vast body of literature discusses "cultural shocks" and "cultural confusion" in foreign visitors' experiences and the process of acculturation and intercultural adaptation, which lead to either successes or failures. Conflicts may depend on the relevance of stereotypes, i.e., of cognitive generalizations that often function as self-fulfilling prophecies based on ungrounded information about companies, attractions, and destinations. Problems may also emerge with positive stereotypes, like in the so-called Paris syndrome (a psychological disorder provoked by the gap between an ex-ante idealized image of the city and the experience of the first visit) (Hottola, 2004).

An experience is memorable when it is perceived as "unique" and, in turn, this results from being distinctive, new, and interesting. Again, all these qualities are relative to the individual *Erfahrung* of the tourist.

Tourism suggests attention to distinctiveness because this quality may be perceived very differently by visitors and locals of a specific destination (Boley et al., 2018). The latter are likely to have a heightened perception of the peculiarity of their places, monuments, traditions, local food etc. and may tend to underestimate similarities with other destinations; the former are more likely to simplify information by emphasizing similarities and to group specific items into more general concepts, e.g. referring to wider areas (a country rather than a region; a region rather than a place), especially when visiting for the first time. A repeat visitor may have a greater propensity to appreciate more subtle distinctions.

Novelty is directly connected with the learning dimension of the experience. A cultural experience may be significant and yet mostly confirmatory of previous knowledge and just complementary to it (e.g., visiting a museum in our own area of expertise may just add details to what we already know). The experience is likely to be memorable when learning has an exploratory and even surprising character ("I didn't know").

An experience that conveys meanings that are interesting and relevant to the visitors (either individually or collectively: a group, a generation, a nation, etc.) is likely to be memorable. If it is connected to important values, the learning process may have a transformative effect on the visitor(Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Soulard et al., 2021), e.g., by creating or increasing awareness of a significant problem, of a relevant phenomenon in history, etc. Meanings are often conveyed through "stories" that provide strong emotional connections. An interesting story may change the essence of the experience by focusing on some specific aspects rather than on others. It is the story that will make the experience memorable.

3. From Authenticity to Sincerity

Authenticity is an experience quality that is highly praised by customers of a very wide range of products(Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Nunes et al., 2021). Especially in manufacturing, it is often connected to objective factors, such as the place of origin ("made in"), the quality and characteristics of design, the production process, the use of specific materials, etc. However, in these cases, the relevance of objective authenticity is often challenged. Is a mozzarella cheese not produced in the original regions of Southern Italy necessarily inferior to the mozzarella cheese produced elsewhere? Is the customer's perception of Britishness in a Burberry trench disturbed by the fact that it is manufactured elsewhere?

In tourism, the search for authentic experiences is unanimously indicated as a priority. Tourist satisfaction is linked to the perception that their experience is not perceived as fake, false, copied, imitated, etc.: in other words, that it is authentic. The search for the real or the authentic is even more critical for those social groups (e.g., inhabitants of metropoles) that perceive themselves as living in an artificially constructed context characterizing contemporary societies and express a wish to reconnect with nature, traditions, and essential values of life.

Tourism offers a valuable opportunity to examine the ambiguities surrounding the concept of "authenticity"(Moore et al., 2021; Wang, 1999). Specifically, tourism challenges the notion that authenticity is an objective quality of an experience. On the contrary, the perception of authenticity varies according to the characteristics of individuals and groups and is mediated by the narratives that convey meanings relevant to visitors. Patently artificial settings, like Disneyland or Las Vegas, are quoted as examples of how objectively inauthentic attractions may provide authentic experiences to visitors(Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

At the same time, objectively authentic attractions, like bullfights in Spain or the Palio di Siena in Italy, may be unacceptable. Of course, they belong to the heritage of the respective places, but contemporary tourists may find that tradition in conflict with their changed values, namely those concerning the respect for animal life(Fennell & Sheppard, 2024).

In other cases, objective authenticity is simply impossible and irrelevant. In film-induced and literary tourism, experiences are often designed around fictional

characters (from a novel, a play, a movie), but they can nonetheless be emotional, meaningful, and deeply inspiring(Buchmann et al., 2010).

An interesting discussion in the tourism literature has concerned the case of Maori tourism in New Zealand. Traditional activities designed for tourist consumption have focused on the attempt to reconstruct a Maori experience based on simulated pre-European life, a presentation of the past that supposedly satisfies the Western nostalgia for an "un-spoilt" culture. The new Maori tourism, on the contrary, rejects that kind of musealization and proposes encounters between tourists and locals, that introduce the former to the contemporary life of Maori communities and to their cultural and social identities, as they live on in the present world. Thus, the Maori tourism case suggests looking at "sincerity" (the result of contact and interaction between groups and individuals) rather than "authenticity" (an objective, internal quality of the "other") (Taylor, 2001).

Many successful tourist attractions (e.g., wine and beer museums, historic parks, etc.) are based on "staged" authenticity. This means that they are constructed as hyper-reality, i.e., a mixture of true and "fake" elements, whenever original elements are not available. Consumers may be unable to distinguish between the two. However, the quality of the planning and performance and of the design of ambient conditions (the "experience-scape") may contribute to the tourists' satisfaction, to their learning, and to their positive emotions (Frochot & Batat, 2013; Gardiner et al., 2022; MacCannell, 1973).

To sum up, tourism seems to be aware (and possibly more aware than other industries) of the complexity and undefined nature of the authenticity concept and of the need to shift from an object-based view to a different one, where authenticity emerges as an intersubjective, negotiated quality between the insiders' narratives and the outsiders' expectations.

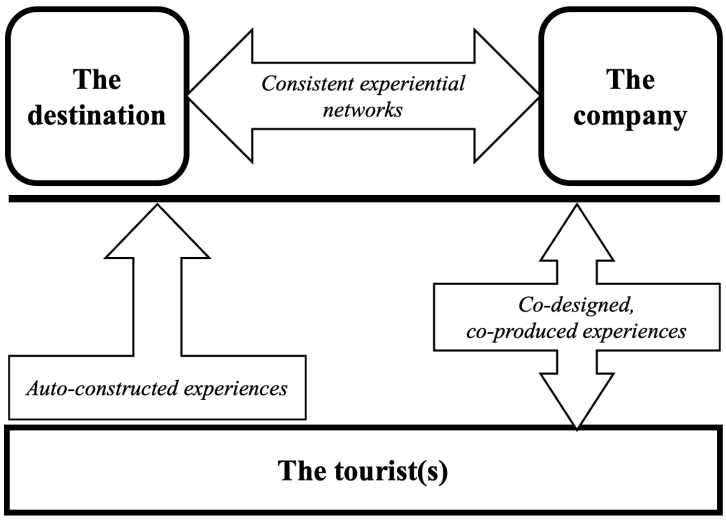
4. A Multi-Actor Approach

The design of experiences in tourism can rarely be realized by just one actor. Tourism has always maintained the need to differentiate and combine the conduct and performance of individual actors (companies, cultural institutions, etc.) with the strategies and performance of destinations. In tourism research, individual actors and territories are two distinct, but interrelated units of analysis.

Furthermore, great attention has been paid to the active role of the customer, i.e., the tourist, in ways that perfectly fit in the definition of the "prosumer" role by the service marketing literature (Chandler & Chen, 2015; Ertz et al., 2024). Although in different degrees, the tourist is a consumer "with a project", i.e., a set of expectations, participates in the design and production, intellectually, physically, and emotionally.

This multi-actor picture is highly relevant in the design and performance of tourism experiences, as summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2: *Tourism Experiences: The Actors and their Relationships*



The production and consumption of tourism experiences are, most of the time, place-bound. This is not just a matter of physical proximity, but a consequence of the necessary contextualization of those experiences.

Therefore, the design of experience within an individual actor (hotel, restaurant, transportation company, museum, amusement park, etc.) should not be inconsistent with the experience that derives from the destination and from other offerings in the area. The role of destination in the tourism experience is to increase the experience value of the individual products by means of consistent identity creation. In turn, the role of the company is to contribute to and strengthen the credibility of the destination experience by means of consistent offerings (Lorentzen, 2009).

This implies the need for individual actors to bundle services (and therefore experiences) by networking with other actors inside and outside the tourism industry in the strict sense (Marcoz et al., 2016). The bundling of experiences may be the purpose of specialized platforms (e.g., GetYourGuide), and it is also performed by global OTA platforms such as Expedia, Booking, and Airbnb. The last two of them also use the word "experience" to provide their customer, in a frictionless way, not just with accommodations, but also with guided tours, activities (either mainstream or tailored), somehow reproducing the role of a concierge in hotels (Bellini & Convert, 2017).

Experience and service bundling is not without challenges, first of all, because of the need to be selective in the integration of the networks. However, a major issue is also the commodification of experiences, which some critical scholars identify as one more instance of contemporary consumerism (Bryman, 2004; D'Eramo, 2021).

Experiences are also defined and performed by tourists, who are co-creators, i.e., co-designers and co-producers, of their own experiences. This phenomenon is linked to the progressive empowerment of tourists, thanks to new technologies and the Internet, which provides them with an unprecedented level of control in their

relationship with companies and destinations and with the possibility to combine information in a creative and highly personalized way.

Co-creation does not happen only with individual tourists. Collective co-creation is equally important in tourism as a result of several converging trends. Firstly, it derives from the co-consumption by different individuals in the local experience-scape. Secondly, it is part of the whole phenomenon of the sharing economy (Giachino et al., 2017). Thirdly, it originates from the increasingly important role of digital communities, tribes, subcultures, etc. (Carù & Cova, 2015; Ozuem & Willis, 2022) in shaping new niches of "sensation tourism" (Brondoni, 2016), like music tourism (Friel, 2024) or urban exploration (Fraser, 2012).

In tourism marketing, this has an important implication, i.e., that in many cases, experiences can be auto-constructed by tourists. Stated differently, self-organized activities and business-organized activities are on a continuum. In a way, businesses "compete" with their own clients, who are becoming more capable of organizing themselves (Frochot & Batat, 2013). The more complex and unique the experience designed and proposed to tourists, the less likely they will be able to perform it autonomously.

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