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Designing memorable guest experiences

Development of constructs and value generating factors in luxury hotels

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Abstract

Purpose – Managing the customer experience is critical for hospitality businesses because business viability can depend on the delivery of valued guest experiences. The industry lacks research that can assist in developing the specific measures and tools to design experiences that meet guests' expectations. The purpose of this paper is to identify the constructs and generators of memorable experiences (ME) from the perspectives of luxury hotel hosts and guests.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected in two sequential phases. In the first phase, non-probability sampling was used to engage luxury hotel experts in a Delphi study. This was followed by in-depth, face-to-face interviews with frequently staying luxury hotel guests.

Findings – In total, 40 value generating factors emerged from the host data. These were validated with guests; however, guests also revealed a further 19 value generating factors that develop ME. These factors were clustered into five constructs and formulated into a ME framework that presents the constructs and supporting variables that can facilitate memorable luxury hotel experiences.

Research limitations/implications – Guests were asked to recall previous luxury hotel experiences and it is acknowledged that recall of past experiences can be inaccurate. The sample size was also relatively small.

Practical implications – Critical, value generating factors were identified that hotel operators can employ to actively engage luxury hotel guests and ensure their experiences are memorable.

Originality/value – The study extends our understanding of the constructs and variables that contribute to the development of ME identifying the importance of sensory generators and the role of authenticity and destination specific culture in creating unique, ME. These key drivers can be used to increase guest satisfaction, loyalty and repeat visitation.

Keywords Experiential consumption, Luxury hotels, Loyalty, Value creation, Memorable experiences, Service experience constructs

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The importance of managing customer experiences is recognized in many business contexts, especially within the service sector where it is considered a critical dimension in developing customer loyalty (Minkiewicz *et al.*, 2016; Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018). The significance of experience management is magnified within the hospitality industry because the viability of hospitality businesses can depend on the delivery of valued guest experiences (Harkison *et al.*, 2018). Research has shown that the value customers' derive from the consumption experience is based on situation-specific, economic and hedonic dimensions evaluated across multiple experience interactions (Mccoll-Kennedy *et al.*, 2015; O'Mahony *et al.*, 2013). Luxury hotels encompass all of these dimensions; however, guests' evaluations are dependent on their perceptions of the physical environment, human interactions and the value they perceive that they have derived from the overall experience (Nilsson and Ballantyne, 2014; Walls *et al.*, 2011).

Harkison *et al.* (2018) asserted that luxury hotel guests have become more discerning, demanding and hedonistic. This requires hotel operators to have a deep understanding of



the factors that generate value, satisfaction and loyalty (Johnston and Kong, 2011; Yang and Mattila, 2016). There is a correlation within the literature between experiences, satisfaction and loyalty but there are important distinctions between routine and memorable experiences (ME) (Hwang and Seo, 2016; Prebensen and Rosengren, 2016). Pine and Gilmore (1999) defined ME as encounters that have undergone a level of customization that renders them memorable to the point where customers are willing to pay a premium and repurchase. However, customers determine whether experiences are memorable based on both rational and emotional assessments (Barlow and Maul, 2000).

While scholarly interest in experience management has led to a growing body of knowledge, there is a lack of integration between the outcomes of experience research and the principles of hospitality management (Kandampully *et al.*, 2018). There is also consensus that further research is required to uncover the deeper drivers and antecedents of ME (Mccoll-Kennedy *et al.*, 2015). Specifically, hospitality researchers have identified the need for research into the factors that affect guests' expectations of experiences, measures and tools that can improve customer experience management (Kandampully *et al.*, 2018), and studies that can facilitate the design of customer experiences within the hospitality industry (Hwang and Seo, 2016).

This study seeks to address these gaps by uncovering the major constructs and variables that generate value and lead to ME from the dual perspectives of luxury hotel hosts and guests. Once uncovered, we synthesize the major experience constructs and value generating factors into a framework that presents a series of specific variables. From a theoretical perspective, these variables can be used to develop appropriate measurement scales for future hospitality research. Hotel operators can also use the framework to ensure that the specific variables that guests' perceive add value and develop ME are included in their products and services.

Review of relevant literature

The rise of the experience economy

Toffler (1970) was among the earliest authors to report on the experience economy. He predicted that consumer wealth or affluence and societal improvements would result in an economy dominated by industries centering their offerings on experiences. Schulze (1992) later confirmed that rising affluence within different social strata meant that experiences were becoming an important component of people's lives. Affluence was also a key driver of experiences identified by Lorentzen and Hansen (2009), while Van Doorn (2006) noted that improvements in society stimulated by rising affluence would expand the possibilities for consumer experiences. This captured the essence of Pine and Gilmore's (1998) article and subsequent book *Welcome To The Experience Economy* which charted the transition from services to experiences.

In this book, Pine and Gilmore (1999) explained that specific industries, including hospitality, lend themselves to the production of unique and ME. Morgan and Watson (2007) later confirmed that the industries most affected by experience consumption are leisure, sport, tourism and hospitality. While the literature reflects growing scholarly interest in examining the importance of customer experiences, research into the experience phenomenon is still at a relatively early stage (Johnston and Kong, 2011; Koenig-Lewis and Palmer, 2014). One reason cited for this is that diversity in definitions of experiences has inhibited our understanding of the experience concept (Palmer, 2010). For example, consumption experiences have been presented as experiential consumption (Woods, 1981), hedonic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982), authentic experiences (Cohen, 1979), emotional experiences (Westbrook and Oliver, 1991), extraordinary experiences (Arnould and Price, 1993), holistic experiences (Lasalle and Britton, 2003) and unique experiences (Azevedo, 2010).

Nevertheless, the transition to experiences has required service providers to understand changing consumer expectations. Consequently, studies have increasingly centered on the link between customer satisfaction and the experiential elements of consumption (Bagdare and Jain, 2013). Identifying these elements is important because traditionally service evaluation models measure service interactions by exploring the gap between customer expectations and their perceptions of how those expectations have been met (Hall *et al.*, 2017; Berry and Parasuraman, 2004). While meeting consumers' expectations leads to satisfaction, behavioral intentions are also influenced by the quality and value determinants (or value generators) of the service experience (Min *et al.*, 2002; Yang and Mattila, 2016). Invoking positive emotions by engaging customers has also been found to positively influence behavioral intentions (Azevedo, 2010).

Indeed, as early as 1955, Abbott (1955) proposed that people desire satisfying experiences obtained through active engagement with a product or service. This distinction between active and passive engagement was a feature of Pine and Gilmore's (1998) conceptual paper. According to Schmitt (1999), engagement creates distinctive relational value which differentiates a firm's service experience from competitors. This has prompted businesses to move from the promotion of value based on the features and benefits of services toward the co-creation of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). However, value is difficult to define because it can depend on the context, perspective and expectations of consumers (Oh *et al.*, 2007).

Value co-creation

Within Vargo and Lusch's (2008) concept of service dominant logic, for example, customer relationships are extended and enhanced through customer engagement developed through the co-production of personalized services (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). This creates value for customers, referred to as "value-in-use," where organizations are seen as value facilitators and customers as value creators (Grönroos, 2011). This fits with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) view that value is added by customizing services to transform them into experiences under four specific realms. These are: entertainment, aesthetics, education and escapism.

In contrast, rational responses are based on the functional usefulness of the experience, like counting the number of rides included in a theme park admission price. Lindgreen *et al.* (2009) concluded that those that design memorable customer experiences should "blend both emotional and rational features in valuable combination" focusing mainly on emotional features (p. 124). Experiences are also defined based on the context in which they are consumed. Consequently, experiences should take into account the situation, the environment and the intended goal for which they are designed. This includes what Berry *et al.* (2002) referred to as experience clues, which are based on a deep understanding of the customer journey. These clues allow producers to design experiences based on the physical environment and service setting in which their guests come into contact with the organization.

Experience design

This highlights the need for luxury hotel operators to integrate appropriate clues into guests' experiences. However, most hotels are designed and positioned to meet specific market niches, for example, as resort, business or luxury hotels (Song *et al.*, 2018). This leads to strategic operational decisions that Jones (1999) described as: "[...] location, integration, affiliation, configuration, organization, implications and adaptations" (p. 429). The configuration of a luxury hotel, however, is determined by standards and brand guidelines – sometimes with additional environmental considerations. Other decisions might be based on distinct design features, product variety, technology-focused innovation or perhaps location-specific determinants such as access to skilled labor (Morey and Dittman, 1997).

The literature thus far has shown, however, that the primary characteristics associated with the development of ME are interactive, experiential and relational in nature (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005). These characteristics generate value and customer empowerment leading to satisfaction which positively influences behavioral intentions (Wiles and Crawford, 2017). Clearly then, businesses that strive to differentiate their offerings need to have an in-depth understanding of the experience desires of their customers to develop the environment, products services and experiences that generate positive emotional responses (Bastiaansen *et al.*, 2019). Harkison *et al.* (2018) referred to this as “setting the stage.” Understanding how luxury hotel designers and operators do this is a key focus of this research.

The industry perspective

Since chain hotels adhere to standards developed at head-office, gaining an understanding from those responsible for developing these standards at corporate level was important. As a main driver of the experience phenomenon is the convergence of affluence and advances in technology, those engaged in the delivery of technology within luxury hotels were also included in the research (Beldona *et al.*, 2018).

The customer perspective

As stated earlier, experiences are inherently personal and evoke emotions on psychological, physical, intellectual and spiritual levels (Nickerson *et al.*, 2006; Torres, 2016). Experiences can also occur over several dimensions including atmosphere, ambience and the degree of interaction between guests and the environment (Khan and Rahman, 2017). They are evaluated across multiple experiential components (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Specific to luxury hotels, the literature review has highlighted that experience design considerations involve clues or value generators that allow producers to design experiences within the physical and relational context in which guests come into contact with the organization. Understanding guests’ perceptions of whether these generators develop emotions leading to ME is, therefore, critical. A simple theoretical model summarizing this relationship is presented below. It highlights that experience constructs include the environment, atmosphere and ambience and that these constructs are supported by a series of value generating factors. Together they lead to the emotional responses that create ME, satisfaction, loyalty and positive behavioral intentions (Figure 1).

Methodology

The luxury guest room

The study is positioned within luxury hotels focusing primarily on the guest room. This is justified because Khoo-Lattimore and Erkiz (2014) found that the guest room was the most important component of the overall stay experience. Product development within hotels also centers around guest rooms because revenue from room sales makes up the bulk of hotel profits (Jones and Paul, 1993). Hence, the luxury hotel room provides a meaningful backdrop to explore luxury hotel experiences among affluent consumers.

Collecting data from luxury hotel hosts and guests

To identify the major ME constructs and value generators of luxury hotel experiences, a constructivist approach was used to collect data from hosts and guests. When employing a

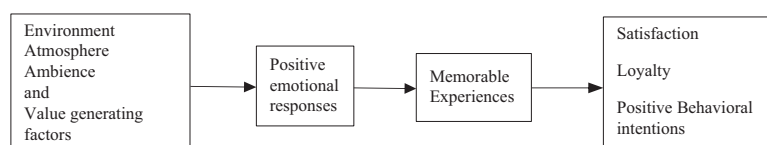


Figure 1.
Supporting
theoretical model

constructivist perspective, the emphasis is placed on ways that people create meaning through a series of individual constructs (Glaserfeld, 1989). This allows participants to display multiple constructed realities of meaning which the researcher interprets within the specific context of the research (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). In other words, data and interpretation are relative to the specific study and those that participate in the study are selected based on their ability to provide deep, qualitative insights into the research phenomenon. This approach was appropriate because experiences are multifarious and evoke emotions among those recalling those experiences that cannot easily be captured using standardized measurement approaches (Koenig-Lewis and Palmer, 2014).

In Phase 1, the developers of experiences within luxury hotels were asked to identify the experience constructs delivered within the guest room. In Phase 2, the results were presented to a sample of frequent luxury hotel guests to validate these constructs, discover further experience constructs and identify gaps between producers and consumers' perceptions of what generates value for luxury hotel guests.

Defining luxury hotels

Before embarking on the collection of data, however, it was important to define luxury hotels. Hotels operating within the luxury segment are typically rated based on industry standards. "Forbes Travel Guide" is a widely accepted industry rating system that considers the overall guest experience. For example, Five Star Hotels are defined as:

These exceptional properties provide a memorable experience through virtually flawless service and the finest of amenities. Staff are intuitive, engaging and passionate, and eagerly deliver service above and beyond the guests' expectations. The hotel was designed with the guest's comfort in mind, with particular attention paid to craftsmanship and quality of product. (Forbes, 2013)

Study Phase 1: Delphi study with hosts

In Phase 1, we selected industry experts operating within the "five star" segment who were either in senior management positions within luxury hotel groups or luxury boutique hotels. One expert was not engaged in a hotel but was a senior executive within a global technology company that supplied luxury hotels. We refer to these respondents collectively as "hosts."

The Delphi method has been successfully used in science, technology and business since it was developed in 1944. The method was developed because group judgments are considered more valid than individual judgments and thus it was appropriate for this study phase (Buckley, 1995). It is a structured and iterative approach that allows a group to reflect on complex issues and provide anonymous feedback (Donohoe and Needham, 2009). It was valuable in this study because luxury hotel experts can be geographically dispersed making it difficult to engage with them in one physical space.

A three-stage Delphi study was employed where each stage builds on the themes generated during the first stage to gain deep insights and achieve consensus (Day and Bobeva, 2005). The first stage was designed to gain a conceptual understanding of the ME constructs and value generators that hosts perceived addressed guests experience desires. The emphasis was on whether ME were central to guest room design and how hosts expressed their understanding of the generation and exchange of experiences.

Sampling

The Delphi method relies on capturing the views of experts which involves selecting qualified respondents using purposeful sampling. This sampling method is used because researchers need to identify and select an expert panel made up of participants that are motivated by the shared knowledge and insights to be gained from the study (Garrod and

Fyall, 2005). While Smith (1995) has asserted that the size of a Delphi panel should be based on the number of experts available, tourism researchers have determined that between 9 and 12 experts is appropriate (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004).

In this study, hosts were experts in their field and held senior positions in branded luxury hotels or luxury boutique properties. They were targeted based on job titles and decision-making responsibilities and were engaged via an online data capture process. Due to the large concentration of global hotel chains headquartered in North America, all were in leadership positions based in either the USA or Canada. A total of 20 hosts were contacted and 17 agreed to participate. Of these four were unable to fully participate and, having provided limited data during round one, withdrew from the study. The sample profile of the remaining 13 is presented in Table I.

Stage 1 data

In Stage 1, the 17 hosts were asked to identify the dimensions that they perceived generated ME. They were then encouraged to present their perspectives on how these dimensions were delivered within luxury hotels and how they generated value for guests.

Analysis of the first stage

Stage 1 data were analyzed prior to embarking on Stage 2. The data were compiled in a spreadsheet and the analysis focused on extracting frequent, dominant or significant themes that were coded and sorted into value generator themes. This is consistent with the description of how qualitative data should be analyzed using data reduction and display techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) highlighted the benefits of using this matrix approach to analyze large amounts of data because it allows researchers to organize information coherently while focusing on the data required to answer the research questions. This inductive approach also allowed the importance placed on specific topics by hosts to be compared later with those of guests. A content analysis was then conducted and a total of 150 ME generators were found.

The next step was to sort and cluster similar topics into categories or constructs. Four primary experience constructs emerged each of which was underpinned by multiple themes. Construct titles were assigned that would be understood by interviewees when validating

Study phase	Phase I – study participants
Number of participants	13
Age range	30–65
Titles/Roles	Chief Brand Officer
	Snr VP Brand Design
	Vice President Development
	Vice President Global Brands (A)
	Vice President Global Brands (B)
	Snr. Director Global Guest Initiatives
	Manager Global Guest Initiatives
	<i>Management</i>
	General Manager (Global Chain Hotel)
	General Manager (Luxury Boutique Hotel)
	Executive Housekeeper (Luxury Boutique Hotel)
	Executive Director (Marketing)
	<i>Technology/Innovation Executives</i>
	Chief Technology Officer (Luxury Global Hotel Chain)
	Snr Vice President (Global Technology Co.)

Table I.
Delphi study
participant profile

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2,4

the constructs with luxury hotel guests. These were: Technology, with four subcategories; Services, with five subcategories; Atmosphere, with four subcategories; and Culture, with five subcategories. To assist in managing the data, each was given a short category abbreviation (or ID). Table II shows the data analyses procedure where the data reduction process is presented from left to right.

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Stage 2 of the Delphi study

In preparation for Stage 2, the Stage 1 data were further refined and each ME construct was summarized into a broad definition that included the subcategories that made up the category. The purpose was to present these summaries under each of the constructs that had been assigned and to seek consensus that these constructs were appropriate. The process was also designed to ensure that the subcategories or themes that made up the constructs were accurate and that nothing had been missed in the summary of the first stage data (see Table III). Once validated, hosts were asked how they perceived these subcategories influenced ME.

This process allowed the experts to provide more depth and for additional perceptions and opinions to emerge. For example, they advised that the Services category was the most important area where ME are delivered, followed by Atmosphere, then the Culture and Technology categories. We then further refined each validated theme to provide a clearer, more robust scenario that captured the combined hosts’ opinions on what they perceived constituted ME generators. We presented these back to hosts and again solicited their opinion on the accuracy of the analyses. In total, 16 ME generator scenarios were developed and presented under their experience construct categories. Hosts unanimously agreed that the most dominant categories were Services, Atmosphere, Culture and Technology.

Coded data	Frequency	Sub-category
<i>Technology</i>		
21 themes/factors	11	Technology
	2	Connectivity
	4	Audio/TV
	4	Wireless
<i>Services</i>		
67 themes/factors	19	Services
	21	Content
	8	Customization
	4	Amenities
	5	Collateral
	10	Staff
<i>Atmosphere</i>		
47 themes/factors	15	Atmosphere
	9	Artefacts
	6	Seating/Comfort
	14	Design
	3	Home-away-Home
<i>Culture</i>		
15 themes/factors	10	Culture
	4	Participation
	1	Location
Note: 150 factors, 18 subcategories and 4 categories/constructs		

Table II.
Number of ME
generators by
construct category

Table III.
Round 1 data
sets – memorable
experience
construct definitions

Category	Summary
Technology	Systems, hardware, software or applications, the use of which delivers an outcome including connectivity (wired/wireless). The category Technology includes themes such as technology, connectivity, Audio/TV and wireless
Services	Composing and orchestrating the appropriate level of resources, skills, ingenuity and experience for effecting specific benefits extended to guests (either on a monetary or non-monetary basis). The category Services include themes such as services, content, customization, amenities, and collateral
Atmosphere	Mood enhancing lighting, design, services or solutions, and sensory environments. The category Atmosphere includes themes such as atmosphere, artefacts, seating/comfort and design
Culture	The category Culture includes themes such as culture, staff, home-away-from-home. Guest participation, and location

They also validated the experience generators. Examples of the scenarios developed to capture the combined generators for each category are provided below:

Services scenario. ME are generated through creating customizable “themes” (wellness, comfortable robing, scented linen and espresso-making facilities) or uniquely staged events, that are discreetly delivered within the guest room, the hotel or through services focused on personalization and comfort.

Atmosphere scenario. ME are generated by the holistic impact of quality and luxury designed space that emphasizes a home like setting, complemented by the alignment and shape of furniture, fixtures and fittings that provide comfort and sense of space supported by the anticipation of mood enhancing elements (music, lighting, air and textures) that make guests feel special.

Technology scenario. ME are generated by providing effortless connectivity (wired/wireless) of guests’ personal devices to quality in-room systems (AV and Control Equipment), providing access to their own, and in-house content (e.g. movies, music and presentations) whilst allowing for physicality and functionality of in-room technology to be controlled via auxiliary devices, e.g. tablet.

Culture scenario. ME are generated through personalized welcome rituals, customized services and commitment of staff to the hotel guest experience that contain elements of surprise further enhancing the hospitality culture of the property.

Stage 3 of the Delphi study

In the third and final Delphi stage, respondents were asked to provide information on their earlier input. Specifically, they were asked which of the value generating factors would provide a return on investment. This process was included to assess whether these experts would seek to invest in those areas in the future. We sought to determine if they were aware of any value generators that were important to guests but perhaps were not willing to introduce them because the costs may outweigh perceived benefits. This stage sets up the research phase with consumers by allowing the researchers to look for gaps between hosts and guests’ perceptions of aspects of the service experience that create value.

Study Phase 2: luxury hotel guest interviews

The aim of the second research phase was to validate the host data, identify any additional experience constructs or value generating factors and uncover any gaps between hosts and guests. In this phase, data were collected using in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with luxury hotel guests.

The guest sample

Guests were selected based on the frequency of stays in luxury hotels. Those that matched these selection criteria were introduced to the research project by Regional Vice Presidents or General Managers of luxury properties. Each guest was sent research information and asked to contact the researchers directly. The number of qualified respondents who made contact was substantial. As a result, the researchers chose the most experienced travelers based on the number of room nights in luxury hotels. This selection process was used because Pikkemaat and Schuckert (2004) asserted that:

The combination of the twin forces of accumulated travel experience from the past, plus aging implies that today's traveling public has become much more quality conscientious and travel smart, wanting at the same time to have the options and/or combinations of old and new, traditional and modern, active and passive, authentic and derived goods and services including cultural goods and/or cultural encounters. (p. 2)

The majority of those that best fit the criteria were male and traveling for business purposes. Consequently, diversity was sought based on differences in country of origin and experience staying in different luxury hotels, including the number of luxury brands experienced. Those most experienced had stayed an average of 100 days a year in luxury hotels across the northern and southern hemispheres.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on the literature and the findings of the Delphi study. The interviewer stimulated the interviewees by first asking each hotel guest to recall the luxury hotel stays they perceived as memorable. Using the four ME constructs and factors identified in research Phase 1 (Services, Atmosphere, Technology and Culture) as a guide, the interviewer then probed to unearth specific experience elements that interviewees considered had contributed to the development of ME. The interviewer then discussed each of the ME constructs and value generating factors that had emerged in Phase 1.

Interviewing continued until the researchers felt that saturation point had been reached. This is the point at which any further interviews fail to unearth new or additional insights (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). This occurred after the 24th interview; however, the researchers decided to conduct one further interview with the most frequent luxury hotel guest on the list. This interview yielded no new information confirming that saturation point had indeed been reached (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The total number of participants was 25. The brands that interviewees most frequently used were: Four Seasons, Starwood (includes W, St Regis, Luxury Collection, Sheraton), Fairmont, Raffles, InterContinental, Mandarin Oriental, Hilton, Hyatt (Park Hyatt, Grand Hyatt), Marriott (Ritz Carlton), Shangri-La, Peninsula and Aman Resorts. A significant number of interviewees had also stayed in independent luxury boutique hotels.

Findings*Hotel guests perspectives*

The interviews were transcribed and a content analysis of the transcripts was conducted using the same sorting and coding process that had previously been used with the host data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This involved identifying key themes, the number of times these themes were mentioned and the number of respondents who mentioned a theme (Harkison *et al.*, 2018). A total of 38 ME value generating factors were extracted from the data and these were

clustered under the four ME constructs identified in Phase 1 (Technology, Services, Atmosphere and Culture). Guests identified 19 additional ME generators to those that hosts had presented. Although most of these could be presented under the initial four constructs that emerged from the host data, some were not associated with those construct categories.

The researchers labeled these as sensory themes and created a new Sensory category which was defined as: the emotion evoking dimensions of experiences that interviewees asserted provided a general sense of well-being. These were: views, spaciousness, color scheme, olfaction (smell) and touch (fabrics, materials). This category captured the emotional aspects of experiences, and tapped into the meanings interviewees placed on their past ME. The new category was added to the four primary experience construct categories. The five categories and their respective value generating factors are presented in Table IV. Those value generating factors that were not identified in the research with hosts are presented in *italic*.

The most important value generating factors that emerged within the Sensory category were ME reflecting “spaciousness,” window “views” and “touch.” Several guests commented on the quality, feel and touch of materials, such as linen, fabrics and amenities. They also appreciated attention detail in the presentation of luxury hotel rooms. While the overall size of the room was important, it was the upkeep and the size and quality of the bathroom that generated ME. For example:

It's the bathroom. It's the space. It's the tidiness. If it is light or dark. I prefer it being light. And then it's really the cleanliness – little spots on the walls are an absolute no-go. If I'm in a high-class hotel, the smallest things are an absolute no-go. I think this is the justification for the high price that it's flawless. I would even say it's more the bathroom than the bedroom maybe. (Interviewee ID08, female)

Apart from the size, quality and upkeep of the room, window views were important generators of ME. For example: “Well, what I do love is the view. Views are always an important criterion for choosing a guest room” (Interviewee ID04, male). The quality of materials and sensation of touch also generated ME:

It's the materials. It's very much the materials. I love the menu in a real folder, best in leather with the logo being pressed into it. Everything being of high quality and I can feel it. That makes it very memorable for me because it's the “real” you want. So, if I go somewhere and it feels solid and well handcrafted, this is something that I remember for ages. (Interviewee ID08, male)

And:

It is never only the space. It is everything that you feel and you touch. It's the fabric or the material of the things, of the sofas, of the linen. It's the comfort of materials. (Interviewee ID16, female)

While the size of the room was linked to guests' expectations of luxury, the main emphasis was on experiences generated through views from the room, quality of materials and the sense of touch felt from fabrics and other surfaces. These sensory generators had not been identified by hosts indicating a significant gap between hosts and guests' perceptions of what generated valuable and memorable guest experiences. Overall, however, the most dominant constructs perceived by guests belonged to the Services and Atmosphere categories, followed closely by the Culture and Technology categories and then the Sensory category.

From the host perspective, experiences were predominately designed and delivered around generators that belonged to the Services category. These factors were content, customization, amenities and collateral. Hosts referred to digital and non-digital content and service factors as the most frequent generators of ME. They perceived that they were delivering ME that immersed guests actively in the experience itself.

Guests also perceived that services, amenities and content were value generators. Keywords that described the meaning guests gave to services were “at a moment's notice” and “the quality” of the service experience. This related to “touch,” “feel” and “consistency”

Table IV.
Guest data with
additional
themes in italic

Analysis of guests' data (five categories/constructs)			
Categories – subcategories	ID		No.
Technology	TECH		Coded data
Technology	55		20
Connectivity			12
Audio/TV			11
Wireless			6
<i>Pre-arrival personalization</i>			2
<i>Location-based services (apps)</i>			2
<i>Social network (apps)</i>			2
Services	SERV		Coded data
Services	201		53
Content			26
Customization			6
Amenities			33
Staff			43
Collateral			5
<i>Personalization</i>			3
<i>Preferences (personal)</i>			8
<i>Bath Recognition Surprises (memorable)</i>			0
<i>Complimentary services</i>			7
<i>Learning new things</i>			11
<i>Experiencing new things</i>			6
<i>Dining (in-room)</i>			0
Atmosphere	ATMO		Coded data
Atmosphere	157		30
Artefacts			11
Seating/comfort			25
Design			56
Hone away from home			9
<i>Bathroom</i>			12
<i>Purposeful design</i>			12
<i>Lighting</i>			2
Culture	CULT		Coded Data
Culture	50		8
Participation			3
Location			10
<i>Recognition</i>			18
<i>Familiarity</i>			2
Sensory	SENS		Coded data
<i>Views</i>	24		7
<i>Spaciousness</i>			10
<i>Color Scheme</i>			2
<i>Touch (fabrics/materials)</i>			5
			478

which they remembered as memorable sensations. The most significant finding from guests, however, was being acknowledged and personally recognized. This stood out as a gap between what hosts considered “personalized” and guests’ desires to be recognized and remembered as unique individuals.

Discussion and conclusions

Conclusions

The analysis of both research phases yielded five major constructs underpinned by tangible and intangible experience generators. For example, the technology construct was predominantly

comprised of tangible generators, such as systems, hardware, software, applications and connectivity to audio and TV. However, guests indicated that they sought to experience new things and to actively engage with entertaining content that is interactive, co-produced and accessible via their personal devices. They frequently mentioned their experiences with in-flight entertainment noting that these were interactive and on demand.

The services construct, which included 57 value generating factors, was the most dominant for hosts and guests and included in-room services, amenities, opportunities for customization and audio and TV content. However, guests identified the experience and skills of service staff, coupled with their local knowledge and level of guest engagement, as central to the development of ME. These were described as a desire for human-to-human interactions with staff on a personal level. The majority of service generators within this construct were also intangible and thus subject to guests' perceptions of satisfaction.

The atmosphere construct played a supporting role in ME generation and included room design, furnishings, mood enhancing lighting, artefacts and levels of comfort. These findings connect with previous research where ambience and overall atmosphere have emerged as important cues in a variety of service environments (Hall *et al.*, 2005). However, it was not so much the physical or artistic attributes of the environment that triggered ME. Rather, it was the local cultural context and levels of engagement with service staff that created the memorable moments that transformed ordinary experiences into those that were memorable. This transformation is underpinned by what Koenig-Lewis and Palmer (2014, p. 198) described as "[...] stimuli that create value for consumers."

The culture construct was also heavily influenced by service staff, mainly because guests sought their advice on local culture as well as opportunities for participation and co-creation. Guests stressed the importance of experiencing the place, which they considered must be reflected in the location, culture, engagement with local staff and opportunities to learn new things. Thus, this construct has the potential to engage guests as co-creators of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) while also creating an active role for hosts as value facilitators (Grönroos, 2011).

Guests reflected on the importance of sensory elements in emotive terms including the touch of materials and the sense of luxury experienced through the spaciousness of bathrooms, or inspiring views. These generators evoked strong feelings that can influence brand attitudes and the overall evaluation of services (Grace and O'Cass, 2004; Chou *et al.*, 2016). Guests also spoke of the importance of multi-sensory experiences indicating that when sensory themes were combined, the emotions and feelings that were created triggered their most ME. This is significant because when sensory characteristics are combined, they can provide unique experiences that create a competitive advantage (Palmer, 2010). Previous studies have also uncovered a direct link between emotions, satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Koenig-Lewis and Palmer, 2014). Consequently, the sensory construct plays a significant role in achieving unique selling points along with repeat visitation and/or positive communication.

Hosts had not recognized the importance of the sensory experience generators showing a gap between hosts' perceptions of guests needs and guests expectations of a luxury hotel experience. Differences were also found in the expected levels of engagement, co-creation opportunities, connecting guests to the destination and the local culture, as well as the fundamental role of service employees. While these co-creation experiences can empower guests, they can also bridge the gap between guests' expectations and their perceptions of performance (Hall *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, it is important for hosts to understand the generators that drive satisfaction, create value and transform a luxury hotel stay into a ME that enhances consumers take-away value perceptions (Arnould and Price, 1993; Carbone and Haeckel, 1994).

Conceptual model of memorable experience constructs

To address the disparity between hosts and guests five significant constructs underpinned by 36 value generating factors were identified. These were formulated into a ME framework that presents the antecedents, constructs and variables that facilitate ME (Figure 2). The purpose of this framework is twofold. First, it highlights the key drivers of ME that are valued by guests and lead to overall satisfaction, loyalty and repeat visitation. Second, it provides a foundation for the development of a quantitative instrument that researchers can use to conduct further research into the ME phenomenon.

Theoretical contribution

The study extends our understanding of the constructs and variables that contribute to the development of ME within a hospitality context and specifically within luxury hotels. It goes beyond the conceptual to develop a framework based on an in-depth research process that incorporates the views of senior luxury hotel executives

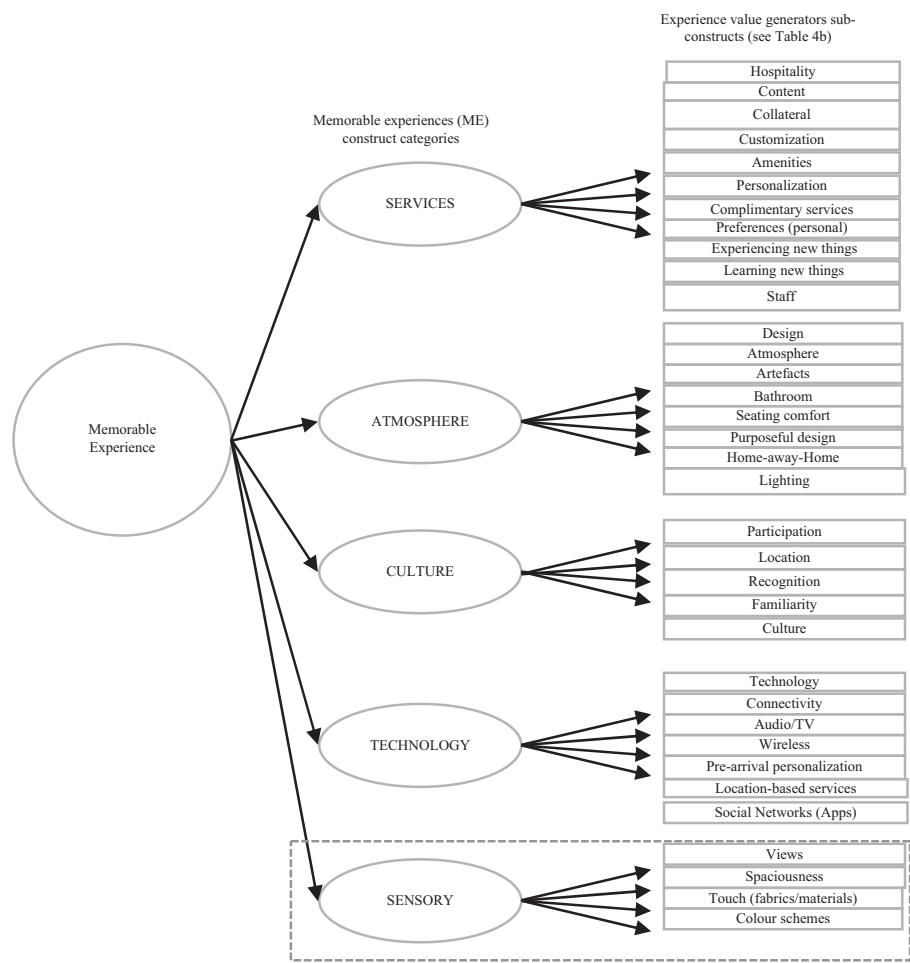


Figure 2.
Memorable experience
construct framework

and frequent luxury hotel guests. The research also validates a number of the constructs presented in recent studies, for example, the critical role of technology and co-creation opportunities, which are important in all hospitality services (Hwang and Seo, 2016).

Our study goes further, however, by identifying the importance of the touch, feel and consistency of the sensory construct and the role of authenticity and destination specific culture in creating unique, ME. By developing five constructs with their underpinning value generators, we have addressed the need to understand the factors that affect guests' expectations of experiences emphasized by Kandampully *et al.* (2018). Additionally, we have gone some way toward uncovering the important design elements for customer experiences specific to hospitality called for by Hwang and Seo (2016). These constructs and value generators can also be developed as scales that can form the basis of a quantitative research instrument and thus go some way toward providing the better measures and tools that are required for customer experience management (Kandampully *et al.*, 2018).

Practical implications

The study identified a mismatch between hosts' perceptions of the factors that drive ME and create value for guests. Hosts, therefore, risk designing luxury guest experiences that fail to provide the quality services that align with the needs of their guests and generate ME (Wu and Yang, 2018). This is significant because of the increasing cost of real estate as well as intense competition within the luxury hotel sector.

To overcome this misalignment, hosts need to emphasize those elements of the experience that enhance guests' perceptions of value (Sipe and Testa, 2018). With this in mind, the framework that has emanated from this study can provide a practical toolkit to assist hosts to better understand the generators that connect their guests with positive experiences (Johnston and Kong, 2011). Thus, the framework can allow hosts to develop strategies to transform ordinary experiences into value generating experiences that address the needs guests (Sundbo, 2009).

This begins with setting the stage and in this study several important elements emerged. For example, guests' reporting on technology indicated that they sought to connect with hotel systems and view personally curated content. These preferences could easily be gained in a pre-arrival call where content preferences could be determined in advance. Similarly, being acknowledged and personally recognized was important. Using social media to reach out to guests or simply to be informed about them could also be done pre-arrival, while returning guests' preferences could be noted in the guests file prior to check in.

Within the sensory construct, the feel and touch of materials and fabrics needed to exude the luxury experience. These guests understood the difference between high and low quality fabrics and it was the feel of the fabric that they used to define quality. As such, the finest grades of cotton and linen should be used on sheets towels, robes, slippers and all fabrics that guests' touch or feel. Handcrafted was mentioned as a sign of luxury and quality and this related to furniture as well. Quality was also mentioned in relation to in-room amenities, for example, a preference for menu covers to be leather and the bathroom amenities to be luxury brands. The quality of the bathroom was paramount and the size of the bathroom was more important than the size of the bedroom. The overall design of both the bedroom and the bathroom was also important with the décor and furnishings coming together seamlessly so that the space itself is stylish, comfortable, tasteful and pleasant.

Flawlessness was mentioned several times not only in relation to the sensory elements of the room but also to service. Service was expected to be immediately available, of high

quality and consistent with the luxury concept. Quality in-room dining options that allow guests to experience new things were also important along with local produce. Service staff were also expected to have local insights.

While these individual value generating factors were important to develop atmosphere, and ambience, the issue of engaging guests emotionally is critical. Hotel operators need to consider ways to actively engage these guests if their experiences are to be memorable. Examples might be in-house wine tastings with a sommelier, trips to local vineyards, dining with the hotel manager, learning specific cooking techniques, for example, making dim sum, or using a blowtorch to personally caramelize a crème brûlée. These “value in use” activities can leave the lasting impressions that create ME (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). From a learning perspective, discussing the history of the hotel or any special paintings, plants or famous guests can also invoke positive emotions that lead to ME. These in turn lead to satisfaction, loyalty and positive behavioral intentions but they are also unique to a property which provides a competitive edge (Yang and Mattila, 2016).

Limitations and future research

One limitation of the research is that guests were asked to recall previous luxury hotel experiences and it is acknowledged that recall of past experiences can be inaccurate. The sample size was also relatively small. Nevertheless, the findings uncovered significant ME construct categories and their experience value generating factors that hosts and guests considered important. Future research, therefore, might include other areas of the hospitality industry or service-centric industry sectors such as retail and professional services. Quantitatively testing the constructs and variables of the experience framework could also provide a valuable research instrument for future studies.

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