

Experience management in hospitality and tourism: reflections and implications for future research

Implications
for future
research

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide a critical reflection on the management of experiences in hospitality and tourism (H&T). The paper investigates the evolution of experience research, while discussing the emerging challenges and opportunities for management.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts a critical and reflective approach for providing future directions of experience research. Three major fields are identified to discuss advances, challenges and opportunities in experience research: conceptualization and dimensions of experiences; relational network for experience management; and theoretical and methodological approaches.

Findings – The paper proposes a mindset shift to guide experience research, but also to redirect and research thinking and managerial practices about the role of experiences in the economy and society. This proposed humanized perspective to experience research and management is deemed important given the contemporary socio-economic, environmental and technological challenges of the environment.

Research limitations/implications – This paper identifies a set of theoretical and managerial implications to help scholars and professionals alike to implement the humanized perspective to experience research. Implications relate to conceptualization, relational network and theoretical and methodological approaches in experience research.

Originality/value – This study critically assesses research challenges and opportunities around customer experience management (CEM) in H&T contexts. This reflective and critical look at customer experiences not only informs future research for advancing knowledge and practice but also proposes a mindset shift about the role and nature of CEM in the society and economy.

Keywords Experience design, Experiencescape, Cocreation, Technology, Eudaimonic well-being, Transformation

Paper type Conceptual paper



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1. Introduction

Experience has garnered increasing attention in several disciplines (Godovykh and Tasci, 2020) and businesses in general (Waqas *et al.*, 2021). This interest was fuelled by seminal works – such as Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) – establishing the perspective of hedonic consumption in consumer behavior, according to which the conventional product value proposition based solely on functional values does not suffice for differentiation. Later, Pine and Gilmore's work (1998) popularized the experience economy as the next stage of economic development, posing experiences as an added value offer to tangible products and services. Subsequently, customer experience management (CEM) was widely advocated as a critical success factor for gaining business competitiveness (Schmitt, 1999; Waqas *et al.*, 2021). Given the experiential nature of hospitality and tourism (H&T), it is not surprising that the customer experience also attracted the interest of numerous tourism academics and professionals, boosting a stream of abundant research over the 21st century (Kim and So, 2022; Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023).

Kim and So (2022) summarized tourism research in experience management into three perspectives:

- (1) the organization viewpoint, i.e. how to design, implement, manage and market compelling experiences to customers;
- (2) the customer perspective, i.e. how individuals assess their experiences; and
- (3) the cocreation-oriented perspective, i.e. how customers cocreate consumption experiences and associated meanings with multiple stakeholders.

Successful experience management should consider all these three perspectives. However, despite the apparent research saturation, the theoretical and methodological approaches traditionally adopted in experience research present some limitations constraining the advancement of knowledge and practice in how to conceptualize, measure and manage experiences.

For example, as concerns experience design, when companies claim they “offer an experience,” they refer to a designed experience that can be managed. This perspective aligns with the experience economy paradigm and related experiential marketing approaches, conceptualizing experiences as individuals' internal responses derived from “emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual levels of consumer engagement” (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, p. 99). Based on this perspective, experience management is limited to the use of stimuli (e.g. colors, scents and music) for directing the customers' attention and enhancing customer engagement around a coherent theme/concept (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999).

Despite the validity and practicality of this perspective, it sees customer experience as an episodic and static event instead of a dynamic and cocreated process where a customer navigates through a “journey” composed of multiple touch-points (physical and digital) with which customers interact during “moments of truth” shaping the perception of the experience (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Indeed, customer experiences are increasingly conceptualized as emerging and being affected by numerous interactions between customers and products/brands, companies and their staff and other customers and/or (virtual) communities. Such encounters are not always under the company's control, but they significantly affect what experiences customers have and what meaning they assign to them. Indeed, recent perspectives (such as the service-dominant logic) recognizing the customer as experience and value cocreators were also introduced into tourism literature a decade ago (Carvalho and Alves, 2023). Technological advances and applications

significantly support and enhance customer participation and cocreation (Shin and Kang, 2024) and optimize sensory stimuli (Agapito, 2020). Hence, it is unsurprising that systematic literature reviews in value cocreation (e.g. Carvalho and Alves, 2023) identify technology as a key driver of experience management in H&T. However, the continuous technological evolution (e.g. generative artificial intelligence (AI), metaverse and robots) not only enriches tourism experiences but also transforms them and enables new experiences, necessitating the adoption of new theoretical lenses and methodologies to understand the technology disruptions and the newly introduced challenges.

Challenges and limitations are spotted not only in the design and management of experiences but also in the definition and measurement of experiential outcomes. Early research was heavily directed toward experiential outcomes, focusing on the behavioral and cognitive consumers' outcomes (e.g. satisfaction and loyalty). More recently, the research interest shifted to the psychological and spiritual outcomes (e.g. well-being and uplifting of quality of life) for customers and the wider society alike (e.g. Fan *et al.*, 2023; Godovykh and Tasci, 2020; Kim and So, 2022; Tasci and Pizam, 2020; Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023). To better capture and measure the multidimensional and multilevel outcomes of experiences, it is imperative to rethink the theoretical and methodological approaches to understand CEM better.

Contemporary environmental challenges (e.g. crises, climate change, emphasis on corporate social responsibility, increasing interest in well-being and technological revolution) accelerate the need to update and upgrade theoretical approaches and methodologies for understanding and managing experiences. For example, these changes generate new opportunities to explore in experience research such as:

- new technology-driven and enabled experiences;
- new tools for understanding the (new) experiences; and
- a shift of mindset and theoretical perspectives for understanding and resetting the role and the impact of experiences not only on business competitiveness but also on people, the economy and the society alike.

The rise of the experience economy can be seen as a major driver and boost to our capitalistic and consumerism economy, society and mentality. However, sustainability and humanistic concerns should make researchers and professionals think of experiences not as ends in themselves for achieving company and customer benefits but as a means to a social end, uplifting communities' well-being and driving socioeconomic change and transformation.

For example, the critical review from Hwang and Seo (2016) proposes a framework of CEM research based on antecedents (internal/external factors) and consequences (e.g. emotional, behavioral and brand-related outcomes). This reflexive research advocates the relevance of a holistic approach to the design of an experience that can last in memory, "in which multidimensional value can be delivered through multiple, sequential stages of experience" (p. 2240). While the authors state the experience cocreation can lead to a sustainable experience in the sense that it can be "life transforming" or "perspective transforming," it is key also to consider how contemporary challenges (e.g. technology) and a nonlinear approach to CEM based on humanized perspective can add the evolution of CEM frameworks. Overall, a reflective and critical look at CEM is required not only to guide future research and advance knowledge but also to equip H&T professionals with valuable insights on addressing our contemporary and other upcoming socio-economic changes and challenges.

To that end, this paper adopts a critical and reflective approach (Hwang and Seo, 2016; Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2023) rather than a historical development, which has been well-captured

by systematic literature reviews with that purpose (e.g. [Kim and So, 2022](#); [Rahimian et al., 2021](#); [Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023](#)). A “critical reflection paper does not always assume a standard methodology” ([Liu-Lastres et al., 2023](#), p. 237). However, an integrative critical review approach can be used to examine, critique and synthesize the literature on a given topic, allowing new theoretical frameworks and perspectives to emerge. This approach is adequate for mature research topics, such as experience management ([Snyder, 2019](#)). Thus, through critical reflection, this paper identifies challenges and opportunities in experience management in H&T. The conducted integrative review follows three main areas that have been the most addressed in review papers on CEM ([Kim and So, 2022](#); [Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023](#); [Waqas et al., 2021](#)): conceptualization and dimensions of experiences; relational network for experience management; and theoretical and methodological approaches in experience research.

2. Conceptualization and dimensions of experiences

From an experiential marketing perspective, experiences have been conceptualized as the customers’ internal responses to environmental stimuli ([Pine and Gilmore, 1998](#); [Schmitt, 1999](#)). This view aligns with the experience economy paradigm, assuming that companies can create conditions to facilitate perceived positive and meaningful experiences. Such conceptualization of experiences does not differentiate intentionally designed experiences from spontaneous ones, does not consider the cocreation and the codestruction role that customers and other actors can have on experiences, and does not consider the fact that companies are not the sole actors controlling experiences. Moreover, it is crucial to differentiate the stimuli of the designed experience and the outcomes from the experience itself. Personal and situational factors moderating people’s responses to stimuli and their experiences are also relevant because stimuli do not influence individuals *per se*. [Godovykh and Tasci \(2020\)](#) managed to capture all these aspects by defining customer experience as the combination of “cognitive, affective, sensory, and conative responses, on a spectrum of negative to positive, evoked by all stimuli encountered in pre, during, and post phases of consumption affected by situational and brand-related factors filtered through personal differences of consumers, eventually resulting in differential outcomes related to consumers and brands” (p. 5).

Systematic reviews of tourism and hospitality marketing/management research identify a plethora of definitions of customer experiences ([Kim and So, 2022](#); [Rahimian et al., 2021](#); [Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023](#)). In general, there is a consensus around the idiosyncratic, subjective and contextual nature of experiences. Definitions also tend to focus on the internal individual responses to (intentionally company-designed) stimuli (e.g. sensory and affective) aiming to trigger and involve customers’ interactions and engagement with products, services, companies, staff and other consumers. Similar conceptualizations of customer experience can also be found in systematic reviews of general customer experience marketing/management (e.g. [Waqas et al., 2021](#)). Generic and tourism research differ in the use of various terminologies (e.g. “customer,” “user,” “consumer,” “guest,” “visitor,” “traveler” and “tourist”) and the identification of different forms/types of experiences ([Kim and So, 2022](#); [Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023](#)). These differences are unsurprising as the study findings result from different application contexts. Developing a unified definition and typology of experiences is required but challenging. A consensual definition should be general and abstract enough to be applicable in different consumption contexts but also agile and practical so that it can consider contextual factors.

The conceptualization of experiences as responses to stimuli has also influenced early research investigating the composition of experiences, which identified experience

dimensions corresponding to the stimuli triggering the experiences; these studies have not reached a consensus. For example, some studies (Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023) identify five components (affective, cognitive, sensory, social and behavioral), as proposed by Schmitt (1999), while others identified relational elements but embedded them into the affective dimension (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Pine and Gilmore (1998) used two criteria (type of customer participation and customer immersion or absorption into the environment) and proposed four realms of experience, namely, entertainment, education, escapism and aesthetics. This 4E typology of experiences has been widely used in H&T to assess customer experiences in various contexts (Kim and So, 2022; Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023). While some authors consider the 4E typology (operationalized by Oh *et al.*, 2007) adequate to assess the customer experience itself, other authors have used such an experiential scale to gauge experiencescape stimuli (e.g. Mody *et al.*, 2017). However, the literature stresses the need to differentiate the experience itself from the stimuli present in the surroundings where experiences emerge (i.e. the experiencescape) (Godovykh and Tasci, 2020; Packer and Ballantyne, 2016; Selem *et al.*, 2023; Tasci and Pizam, 2020). This is because people's experiences result from perceptual processes, including both bottom-up (based on external stimuli elements) and top-down mental processes (related to previous knowledge, memories and expectations) (Goldstein and Brockmole, 2017). In this vein, Brakus *et al.* (2009) advocated that measures of customer (brand) experience should assess the degree to which the individual has the experience (considering all different dimensions, e.g. sensory, intellectual and affective) instead of focusing on the content/stimuli affecting the experience. This need to distinguish experiential dimensions from the stimuli driving them is also confirmed by the fact that studies using the same measures to assess environmental stimuli and customer experiences lead to no comparable findings.

Other authors have proposed updated typologies for researching customer experiences. For example, Packer and Ballantyne (2016) proposed a multifaceted visitor experience model based on ten facets: physical, sensory, cognitive, emotional, hedonic, restorative, introspective, transformative, spiritual and relational. Authors agree that all these components of experiences can appear simultaneously and to different degrees, and the emotional component is likely involved in most types of tourism-related experiences (Skavronskaya *et al.*, 2017). Also, researchers increasingly recognize not only the restorative facet of experiences but also their spiritual and transformative dimensions (e.g. by being able to trigger mental and cognitive processes of self-exploration, reflection and self-development). Literature discussions about regenerative tourism experiences are soaring (Fan *et al.*, 2023; Hwang and Seo, 2016; Kim and So, 2022; Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023). The latter are usually defined as experiences that not only replenish but also generate new resources, positively contributing to the sustainable development goals of destinations and communities. Tourism can reach its greatest potential by creating conditions for people's life-changing and meaningful experiences. Organizations and researchers should look at how to facilitate the journey for transformation, considering reflection and integration of aspects such as being involved in unfamiliar (and sometimes difficult) activities, appreciating different settings and interacting with new people (Robledo and Batle, 2017).

Despite this plethora of studies, little is still known about how different components of customer experience work in combination, what the contribution of each component to the total experience is, and how organizations can manage stimuli to trigger ideal experiences and different levels considering different individuals' profiles, for example. These questions are yet to be answered in H&T contexts (Kim and So, 2022; Rahimian *et al.*, 2021; Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023).

3. Relational network for experience management: antecedents driving experiential outcomes

The previous section shows that research investigating the nature and dimensions of experiences acknowledges the multidisciplinary nature of the concept. In this vein, literature (e.g. [Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023](#)) contextualizing customer experience in H&T defines it as a construct comprising multidimensional facets of responses (e.g. emotional and intellectual) that result from interactions with external stimuli (e.g. social, physical and company-related), together with customer personal-related factors (e.g. motivation and mindfulness) and situational factors (e.g. travel companions).

This conceptualization of customer experience (as a relational network of antecedents, experiences and outcomes) has important practical implications for experience management, as it differentiates between antecedents of customer experiences, types/dimensions of customer experiences and potential consequences derived from customer experiences ([Agapito, 2020](#); [Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017](#); [Godovykh and Tasci, 2020](#)). Managers can identify which factors affect and lead to specific types of desired experiences to address these factors in experience design and, subsequently, deliver different experiences that can generate specific “company promised” and “desired” outcomes. [Agapito \(2020\)](#) claims the objective of experience design (which is an important stage of experience management) is to develop a connection between users (tourists), design elements and the contexts of interactions. Managers in H&T compete for the tourists’ scarce attention, so the appropriate stimuli should be used to direct the tourists’ attention. For example, managers can shape emotional responses and direct the individuals’ focus to specific stimuli ([Skavronskaya et al., 2017](#)). Moreover, because different motivational orientations can lead to different experience outcomes, understanding customers’ goals and motivations is key to management decisions, such as market segmentation and customer mixology, to help managers group customers together so that the experience of one customer does not negatively affect the experience of another (i.e. cocreation/codestruction view of experience).

The conceptualization of customer experience as a relational network has also influenced numerous studies investigating how to design and manage experiences. These studies mainly understand experience cognition as embodied and situated in diverse environments, adopting an ecological approach to psychology, which deems sensory systems as active rather than passive and, therefore, recognizes individuals’ agency. In this vein, studies investigate both the environment (stimuli) and the individuals’ perspective of the surrounding world ([Carlson, 1997](#)). Examples of some indicative studies are discussed below.

3.1 Antecedents of customer experiences

[Kim and Fesenmaier \(2017\)](#) developed a framework explaining the creation process of tourism experience, which depicts psychological filters (e.g. goals, prior experiences, culture and travel companions) that affect perception and, therefore, cause alterations in individuals’ responses toward the external stimuli. This approach is based upon general models of human-environment interaction by expanding the information-processing perspective. In addition, cognitive appraisal theories advocate that emotions emerge as a response to an internal evaluation of an experience in light of the individual’s personal goals and motivations.

In examining CEM in the hotel sector, [Rahimian et al. \(2021\)](#) work provided evidence of the role of individual factors (e.g. customers’ socio-demographics and psychographics) in affecting customer experiences, which, in turn, highlights the need for managers to

understand, profile and segment customers prior to designing experiences and delivering them (e.g. mixing and grouping similar customer and customizing storytelling to clients' profiles). [Packer and Ballantyne \(2016\)](#) also identified similar internal factors impacting the visitor experience (e.g. previous experiences, interests, expectations and motivations). By reviewing two decades of customer experience research in tourism and hospitality, [Kim and So \(2022\)](#) identified and classified the drivers of customer experience into the following categories: motivational, social and behavioral, cognitive, value-related and technological. By conducting a systematic literature review solely in the hotel industry, [Veloso and Gomez-Suarez \(2023\)](#) concluded a similar categorization of experience drivers: cognitive and sensory drivers (e.g. brand reputation, perceived service quality and sensory marketing, price); behavioral drivers (e.g. autonomy, WOM and engagement); environmental drivers (e.g. environmental sustainability); and technological drivers (e.g. sense of presence, robot service and preview mode). Some studies have also investigated the use of stories and mindfulness techniques (as a type of company stimuli) to direct consumers' attention to a specific theme/concept. Despite being under-researched in H&T, storytelling has great potential to enhance innovative CEM, design and cocreation ([Moscardo, 2020](#)).

Overall, studies distinguish the experience drivers between internal (consumers' socio-demographics, psychographics and culture) and external (brand-related stimuli). Subsequently, studies limit experience design to touch-points (e.g. atmospherics and social environment), which are related to external stimuli controlled by the company ([Rahimian et al., 2021](#)). In this vein, most research on experience management adopts the stance that companies can influence experience by following appropriate experience design principles. This approach is manifested in the widely adopted concept of servicescape (and its design elements), which has also dominated experience research in H&T and has been operationalized in various contexts (e.g. winescape, festivalscape, eventscape, destinationscape and museumscape) ([Agapito, 2020](#); [Fong et al., 2022](#); [Tasci and Pizam, 2020](#)).

Consequently, few studies take an approach that experiences can also emerge spontaneously because cocreation and codestruction processes taking place simultaneously among various actors of a service ecosystem determine the lived idiosyncratic experience of every actor. In fact, [Zha et al. \(2023\)](#) introduced a model for CEM in H&T grounded in the paradox management theory. While managing the customer journey to address anticipated individuals' feelings and fantasies, one should also consider existential (activity-based) authenticity, acknowledging the sociocultural background individuals bring to the experience, beyond object-related authenticity. Moreover, the creation of meaningful narratives extends beyond themed experience elements focused on brand-related orientations. Spontaneity, surprise and embodied experiences are identified as contributors to increased engagement and the perception of extraordinary experiences. The holistic approach to the aspects enhances the formation of long-lasting memories. To navigate the complexities associated with managing these variables, managers can acquire "sociomaterial resources" and implement compensatory strategies to address paradoxes. While the researchers acknowledge the intricate and multiphasic nature of the customer journey ([Lemon and Verhoef, 2016](#)), discussions on incorporating a humanized perspective into the managerial approach to enhance the customer experience in H&T contexts are still needed. Although research about value codestruction has appeared in experience research, we still lack approaches and methodologies to identify, measure and manage the codestruction aspect of customer participation in experiences. Noteworthy, exploring experiential value from a service-ecosystem approach is a complex process requiring network and stakeholder theories and approaches because a value exchange/interaction

among actors may create value for one actor and destroy the experience of another actor (Guan *et al.*, 2020).

Given the increased digitization of tourism operations and the wide adoption of digital/phygital experiences, technology is recognized as a key external element that organizations should consider when designing and managing experiences in our digital era. The literature identifies various factors impacting individuals' interpretation and, therefore, need to be managed to ensure the design and delivery of effective digital experiences, such as the use of digital storytelling and the integration of various customer touch-points and business operations to ensure a seamless and personalized customer experience along the whole customer journey – before, during and after the trip experience – (Rahimian *et al.*, 2021; Sigala, 2018; Zhu *et al.*, 2023). For example, the management of phygital experiences blurring the virtual with the real world has become a priority for companies. However, this is complex and demanding, as it requires understanding how customers mix and interchange between virtual and real experiences along their whole customer journey, how they perceive and interact with virtual and real service actors, objects and touch-points, and how this customer behavior affects their perception, interpretation, assessment and outcomes of the lived experiences.

Overall, there is an urgent need to use theoretical and methodological approaches to investigate experience management and outcomes that can go beyond the company-controlled “staged” and stimuli-designed experience, and instead consider experience management at an ecosystem level representing a network of actors who cocreate or codestroy experiences and outcomes by interacting and exchanging resources. Furthermore, knowledge about customers' behavior, perceptions, interactions and reactions with synthetic service actors, digital actors, virtual humans, synthetic experiences' elements and metaverse experiences is limited. The wide technology terminology and lack of consensus regarding the definition of all these terms further obstruct research and our understanding of technology-enriched and generated experiences.

3.2 Outcomes of customer experiences

While understanding the experience antecedents focuses on the activities and sensory environments that companies can use to influence and drive experiences, efforts to measure and monitor the outcomes of experiences refer to the final stage of CEM. This stage heavily focuses on whether the experience outcomes for consumers and companies align with the experience design purposes (Rahimian *et al.*, 2021), reflecting a company-centric approach to experience management.

Research examining experience outcomes has also encountered difficulties in classifying them. In developing a sensory marketing model, Kim and Fesenmaier (2017) identified major potential consequences of tourist-based experiences related to attitudes, learning/memory and behavior. In their systematic reviews of tourism and hospitality literature, Kim and So (2022) and Veloso and Gomez-Suarez (2023) proposed classifying experience consequences into cognitive (e.g. brand knowledge, perceived service quality, brand trust and attitudes), affective/hedonic (e.g. delight, satisfaction, pleasure, feelings, happiness and well-being) and behavioral (e.g. word of mouth, loyalty and spending behavior) outcomes. The studies have also focused on identifying the factors moderating the outcomes and classified the former into individual filters (e.g. memories) and social influences (e.g. group interaction), which, in turn, consider the idiosyncratic nature of experiences and the social context (cocreation) whereby experiences take place (Kim and So, 2022; Waqas *et al.*, 2021).

Other authors (e.g. Godovykh and Tasci, 2020; Tasci and Pizam, 2020) categorized outcomes between those achieved for companies/brands (e.g. brand commitment, brand

loyalty, brand image, place/destination attachment, intentions and deviant behaviors) and outcomes for consumers (e.g. well-being, transformative benefits and quality of life). An increasing number of studies (e.g. [Fan et al., 2023](#); [Packer and Ballantyne, 2016](#)) pay critical attention to the currently important psychological/transformative consumer outcomes such as learning new skills, life-changing experiences and restoration. Research focusing on behavioral-related outcomes (e.g. customer emotional responses, satisfaction and loyalty) reflects a company-oriented perspective of experience management that is mainly interested in the hedonic aspects of consumption. On the other hand, emergent empirical studies highlighting other outcome variables associated with the eudaimonic elements facilitated by sensory experiences reflect a more human-oriented approach to experience management ([Agapito, 2020](#)). However, although some studies confirm the impact of “transformative” experiences on consumer well-being (e.g. [Fan et al., 2023](#)), a systematic literature review of these studies ([Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023](#)) revealed that the spiritual transformation type is ignored or mixed with psychological transformation.

Most studies are contextual-based and conducted at one point in time. Consequently, outcomes are valid only for the specific sample and context of the experience design under investigation. Hence, findings allow limited generalizations across tourism consumption contexts, consumer cultures and/or generational groups. Studies conducting systematic literature reviews of specific types of tourism experiences (e.g. transformative, dark and memorable experiences, respectively, in [Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023](#); [Rajasekaram et al., 2022](#); [Hosany et al., 2022](#)) have also concluded the same reality, i.e. that the findings of studies focusing on specific forms of tourism experiences are only valid for those consumption contexts. This research approach also does not allow for capturing experience-driven changes throughout the customer journey and time. In addition, when considering the relational network of experiences, many internal and external stimuli (such as memory and related conscious feelings) may change during the experiential dynamic process, resulting in different outcomes. Research has also failed to address the outcomes of experiences at a greater macrolevel (e.g. impacts on the economy, destinations and societies, such as the impact of themed experiences on the maintenance or distortion of local culture and values) and from a higher-order perspective (e.g. the impact of experiences on the mindset of consumers and society institutions). However, understanding the latter types of outcomes is becoming important given the general “accusations” of the experience economy supporting a consumerism society and its negative impacts on the environment, people’s well-being and society’s values.

Research has not yet fully explained how and what “transformative” experiences processes and elements can convert transformational needs into types of consumer well-being. Given the increasing customers’ concerns and expectations about well-being as shown above, it becomes apparent that experience management should adopt a more human-oriented perspective to experience outcomes. Experiences should no longer be managed and seen as a resource consumption process, but as a way for regenerating one’s own and the society’s resources.

4. Theoretical and methodological approaches in experience research

Recent studies conducting systematic reviews on customer experience in H&T ([Hosany et al., 2022](#); [Kim and So, 2022](#); [Rajasekaram et al., 2022](#); [Velo and Gomez-Suarez, 2023](#); [Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023](#)) provide useful insights into the methodological and theoretical approaches that have been used to investigate the field. The systematic reviews reveal a heavy dominance of studies adopting quantitative research in relation to a smaller number of studies using qualitative approaches and methodologies and few studies using mixed methods.

Qualitative approaches have been justified by the highly subjective and contextual nature of experiences. Studies using quantitative methods mainly use self-reported methods (e.g. questionnaires) that adopt experience measuring scales measuring previously validated in different contexts. In this vein, these studies also face their own methodological challenges. For example, the most frequently used scale for measuring customer experiences is the one developed by [Brakus and colleagues \(2009\)](#) because it is general enough to be applied in any brand-consumption-related context. However, while this scale allows comparisons, results give limited help to managers in identifying specific aspects to improve experience design and management. Another scale that is also heavily used is the one developed by [Oh *et al.* \(2007\)](#) (and its related adaptations) because it was derived from the widely accepted experience economy framework proposed by [Pine and Gilmore \(1998\)](#). However, the literature provides controversial results about its use since some studies deem this scale adequate, while other studies report that it cannot cover all types of experiential contexts and related activities. Hence, there is still a need to develop a consensual scale for measuring experience that can consider the diversity of the experience contexts and settings existing in H&T and generate useful and practical insights for the industry.

To further advance experience research, we also need to adopt a plurality as well as a mixology of research methods and approaches. Mixed approaches using complementary methods and innovative assessment forms can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of customer experiences. Instruments from the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience can aid our understanding of the physiological and mental mechanisms associated with experiences, particularly those that can be unconscious, such as emotions ([Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017](#); [Li *et al.*, 2023](#); [Skavronskaya *et al.*, 2017](#)). Big data and business analytics, as well as new technologies (e.g. machine learning, generative AI, brain scanners, wearable devices and mobile apps monitoring people's physiology, sleep and daily life activities) can support and enrich experience research in two ways:

- (1) collecting and analyzing new types of (bio)data (e.g. heart rate, neuron activation, hormones, facial expressions and body motion); and
- (2) provide more effective ways to analyze data that can reveal new dimensions of how people react, perceive and understand environmental stimuli and experiences in various settings both private and public.

Generative AI can not only scan and understand the operations of the human brain and its reaction to various stimuli, but it can also predict human reactions and, subsequently, personalize customer experiences in real-time. Nevertheless, technologies raise numerous ethical, moral, security and legal issues regarding collecting and using such (bio)data for designing and delivering stimuli to direct people's experiences and outcomes. Consumers' reactions to such technology-driven and managed experience will also vary depending on their cultural background, political, philosophical or even spiritual/religion ideology and values.

Moreover, although many studies focus on behavioral outcomes, few use experimental research to assess behavioral change. This approach is deemed more adequate compared to other instruments (e.g. structural equation modeling) when the aim is to assess causality between stimuli and action. When considering the dynamic nature of customer experiences, there is also an increased need for longitudinal studies to investigate the evolution of experiences across different stages. Longitudinal studies can deepen our understanding of the dynamic nature of the customer experience, reveal how and why experiences change/ evolve, highlight changes to customer outcomes across time/stage and offer practical recommendations for managing experiences as a dynamic rather than a static phenomenon ([Agapito, 2020](#); [Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023](#)).

Experience research can also evolve by reflecting and challenging the theories and constructs we have traditionally used to study the field. For example, the stimuli-organism-response (S.O.R.) model has been deemed useful and extensively used in CEM research. However, we should use it cautiously and avoid assumptions that stimuli influence behavior *per se*. The S.O.R. model (which is carved in environmental psychology) supports that stimuli present in the environment affect individuals' emotional states, which, in turn, can result in approach or avoidance responses. This perspective is advanced and embedded into holistic frameworks (such as servicescape and related expanded frameworks), which acknowledge that psychological processes (e.g. goals or purpose, expectations and personality traits) operate as moderating and mediating factors between stimuli and organism (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017; Tasci and Pizam, 2020). Based on this approach, it is not the stimuli *per se* but the cognitive perception of surroundings that elicit emotions. Attention fatigue is also a growing issue in contemporary societies. In this vein, there is an emerging opportunity for research to adopt a diversion approach from the over- or mis-use of stimuli for experience management or for research to focus on the use of specific stimuli to restore human attention and contribute to subjective well-being (Qiu *et al.*, 2021).

Research and practice about consumer experiences in digital contexts have also been dominated by specific approaches and models that may not be fully adequate to capture all experiential aspects and current technological evolutions. For example, companies tend to anthropomorphize all aspects of customer experiences across various servicescape platforms or devices (e.g. anthropomorphic robots, voice assistants/chatbots with human voice and names, e.g. Alexa, Siri). Literature highlights the business benefits of anthropomorphism since, to an extent, the more anthropomorphic a technology is perceived, the greater the likelihood that it can lead to more positive feelings. Studies also indicate that the over-the-limit provision of humanlike characteristics to experience design can lead to consumer reactance, fear, and anger, based on the uncanny valley theory (Christou *et al.*, 2020). In fact, many studies on digital experiences (e.g. Fang *et al.*, 2024) adopt theories and models (e.g. social influence theory and parasocial interactions) following this anthropomorphism mindset paradigm.

However, theories that conform to the uncanny valley paradigm are limited by its underlined assumption that people compare technology objects/environments to a human ideal. Nowadays, people have been exposed to (or even born with) solely or mainly digitally enriched and/or generated experiences, which, in turn, have now become their comparison benchmarks. For example, people (specifically the young generations) have been widely and for long exposed to and interacted with digitally enabled and generated experiences (e.g. synthetic storytelling experiences and humans by using technology to create digital replicas of humans, virtual influencers and virtual brand ambassadors representing companies on social media). Recent findings (e.g. Koles *et al.*, 2024) show that when people know they interacted with technology, they report no problem. In fact, they evaluate their experiences by judging the authenticity of the "robots." Some individuals seem to be familiar with the perception and reality that technology has become, and it can be an experience platform or partner, a social actor or an experience agent. Consumers use a "technology ideal" and not a "human ideal" to evaluate their digital experiences. We currently know little about this technological ideal (Christou *et al.*, 2020). How will people react, perceive and feel about experiences designed, driven, delivered and/or controlled by technological agents (e.g. digital humanity, digital immortality, explanatory generative AI)? In what ways can experience research become more inter-, cross- and multidisciplinary to investigate the complexity of experiences generated by technology?

Theoretical approaches that go beyond the assumptions of the S.O.R. model and uncanny valley theory can be useful in future research aiming to advance our understanding of experiences:

- in new settings (e.g. metaverse, technology-augmented experiences);
- for consumer populations that are underexplored; and
- for the new experiences that are enabled and even generated and synthesized by technologies.

For example, there is a heavy dominance of the visual aspect of tourism experiences. But how do visually impaired individuals experience tourism? How do people that cannot smell or taste, experience food or wine tourism? Future research should use theoretical approaches emphasizing the interplay of stimuli and perceptions (e.g. mental images of people) and consider synesthesia (the combined impact of diverse senses) to unravel the hidden dimensions of experiences of people with sensory disabilities (Agapito, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, research can also focus on understanding how people in technology-supported environments feel and perceive the existence of others not being physically present (Shin and Kang, 2024). Constructs such as “social presence” and “being there” do not necessitate stimuli to trigger people’s senses and emotions. However, current research tells us little about the psychological processes that make people experience the presence or absence of others in technology environments or how people interpret interactions in technology environments. For example, what does it mean or feel that an avatar walks through another avatar or that an avatar teleports itself to another digital destination? Is the latter a travel experience as we currently define it? Research in digital experiences has so far focused on how it is technologically possible to replicate human senses in digital environments (e.g. digitizing birds’ songs and adding human faces and voices into chatbots). However, advances in brain scan technologies and neuroscience may lead to the near future humans do not need to sense a trigger to perceive it through generative AI. Opportunities and challenges are numerous.

5. Conclusions and implications

5.1 Conclusions

This research critically reflected on experience management literature in H&T, focusing on challenges and opportunities around conceptualization and dimensions of experiences, relational network and theoretical and methodological approaches. Figures 1 and 2 depict two major mindsets that have influenced the evolution of experience research: the company perspective and the customer perspective, respectively. Figure 3 illustrates a mindset shift to a humanized perspective. This reflection showed the relevance of redirecting research thinking and industry practices, considering the role of experiences in our economy, society and daily life. A mindset represents a set of beliefs, assumptions or methods influencing a person or group (Dweck, 2006). Mindsets are found to drive learning, research and knowledge, which, in turn, influence the human behavior and actions of managers, employees and consumers. In academia and management, mindsets are used to show how beliefs, values and ways of thinking can shape perception and action in research and industry (Neeley and Leonardi, 2022).

Experience research started and flourished from research in hedonic consumption and the realm of the experience economy that characterized experiences as the next stage of economic development (e.g. Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Figure 1 depicts how this mindset shaped a company perspective to experience research, which viewed experiences as an offer

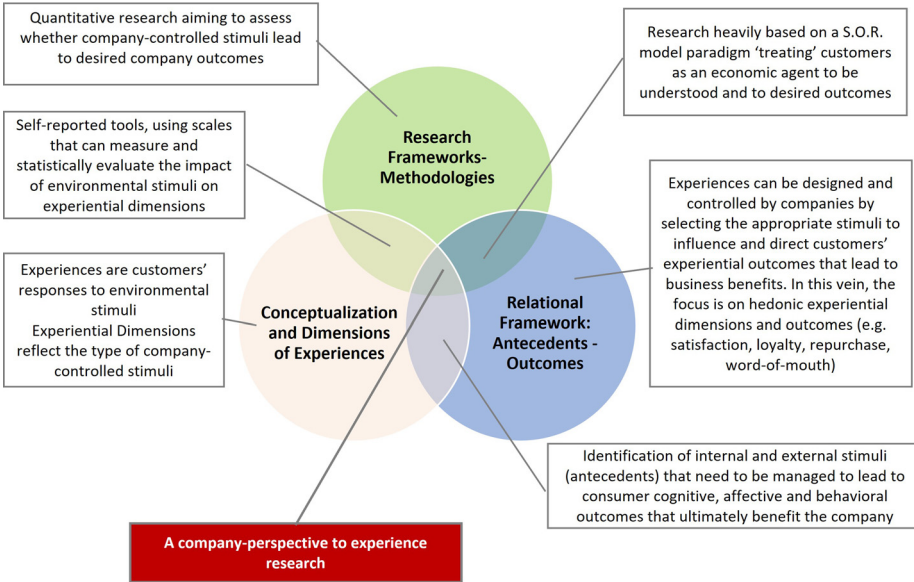


Figure 1.
Company perspective
to experience
research

Source: Authors' own creation

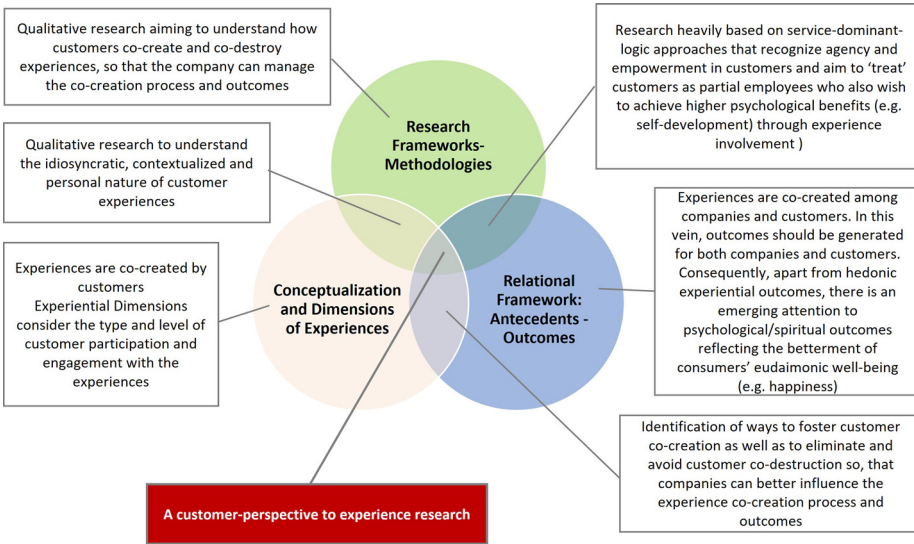


Figure 2.
Customer perspective
to experience
research

Source: Authors' own creation

that companies can design, sell and deliver to achieve differential business benefits. Overall, under a company perspective mindset, experiences were conceptualized as people's responses to environmental stimuli. Subsequently, research approaches and methodologies were developed to help companies design and produce "staged" experiences by selecting

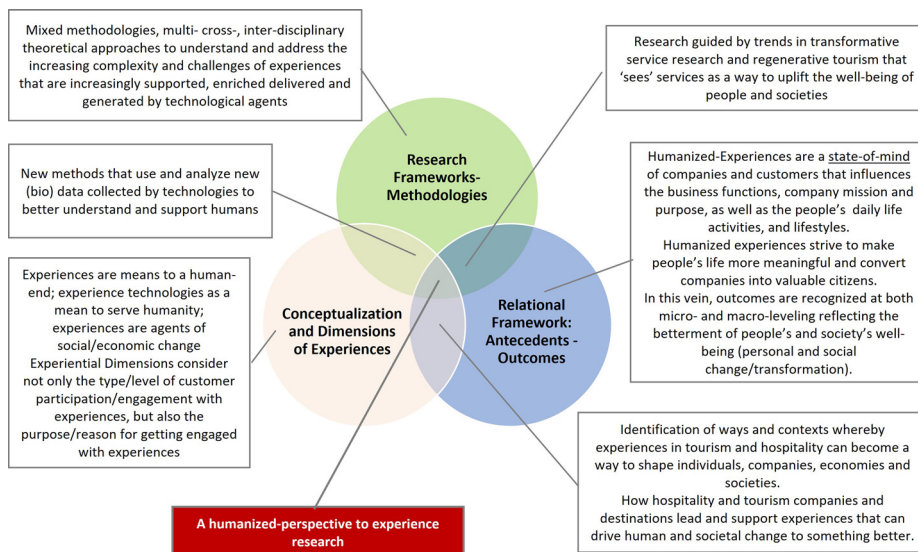


Figure 3.
Humanized
perspective to
experience research

Source: Authors' own creation

and using environmental stimuli that can lead to desired business outcomes, while impacting internal factors that may moderate or mediate the generation of the experiential outcomes. Customers are seen as economic agents aiming to achieve hedonic outcomes. Because of this, it is not surprising that research is focused on investigating positive experiences, such as the stimuli that can be used to lead to positive company outcomes and the factors that can make experiences memorable, as these experiences generate greater company benefits, such as image, revisit, repurchase and positive WOM.

Figure 2 illustrates how experience research has evolved to a customer perspective mindset under the influence of new approaches, bringing a fresh perspective to service research (e.g. value cocreation and service-dominant logic). Under this mindset, experiences are conceptualized to be cocreated with customers. In this vein, experiential dimensions need to consider the degree and type of customer participation and engagement with experiences, while companies need to find ways to manage the value cocreation as well as the value codestruction role and participation of the customer. Customers are perceived as partial employees whose engagement is secured by ensuring the achievement of mutual benefits between companies and customers. Hence, consumer outcomes should not only include cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes that mainly translate to business benefits, but they should also consider the satisfaction of higher-order human needs, such as self-development, status and self-aspiration (Veloso and Gomez-Suarez, 2023). Although this mindset recognizes the eudaimonic dimension of well-being (and not only hedonism), the focus on happiness elements does not differ much from the company perspective, considering that both mindsets reflect experience research that is rooted and aims to satisfy economic growth.

We propose a humanized perspective to experience (Figure 3), which represents a major mindset shift in relation to past research. In this mindset, experiences should be investigated and "managed" as a continuous state of mind (and not as an episodic relational network of controlling stimuli to derive desired outcomes), which guides and influences the thinking,

behavior, lifestyle and mission/purpose of companies and customers alike. The humanized perspective to experience diverts the focus from an individual perspective, emphasizing inner processes aiming to achieve egoistic self-well-being, to a community focus aiming to understand the pathways in which individuals' well-being can contribute and/or lead to community well-being and wider societal transformation. By managing and participating in experiences as an opportunity to serve humanity, this mindset can reset the role, direction, aims and impacts of experience on humans, companies, economies and societies at a macrolevel (Fisk *et al.*, 2020). A humanized perspective to experience research and management can help shift thinking and actions away from a capitalistic, individualistic, economic growth mentality, while probing companies to provide experiences that promote and communicate values, institutions and beliefs supporting a more sustainable and responsible economy and society.

5.2 Theoretical and practical implications

Our critical and reflective approach supports that a humanized perspective on CEM requires major changes in how individuals think and implement research and how industry conducts its business. For example, by drawing on the wine tourism context, Sigala and Rentschler (2019) discussed the theoretical and practical implications of a cellar door synergizing with the art industry to design a creative servicescape using various stimuli and storytelling to trigger people's minds and creativity to self-reflect on their lifestyle, values and interactions with others. The authors explain how the cellar door views its role as an enabler of inspirational wine experiences that aim to instill a culture of moderation in wine consumption and appreciation by helping people understand the role of wine production and consumption for their own and local communities' well-being. A sociocultural ecosystem theoretical approach was used to measure the social value and community impact of this third generation of wine tourism experiences (as named by the authors), which also demonstrates that embedding a humanized perspective into experience management is possible and increasingly appreciated by both demand and supply.

The theoretical and practical implications of the humanized perspective are numerous and intertwined. The proposed mindset theoretically conceptualizes experiences not as a "consumption commodity" or as an end in themselves for achieving economic benefits, but as a means to a human-end, as an agent of socio-economic change and transformation leading to a betterment and uplifting of people's and communities' well-being. This mindset aligns with transformative-service research aiming to "humanize" experiences (Fisk *et al.*, 2020) and regenerative tourism research striving to use tourism as a means to achieve sustainable and responsible growth in destinations and communities. Therefore, this approach contributes to the current debate about the role of tourism and the achievement of UN sustainable development goals, as it provides a pathway on how experiences can be designed (Agapito, 2020) to lead to human and society flourishing and well-being, responsible consumption and production. This mindset approach highlights that for achieving society wide benefits and transformation, humanized experiences need to be embedded into people's/companies' everyday practices as well as become part of one's/companies' worldviews. For this to happen, it is not enough to design experiencescapes, but also to identify and use appropriate qualitative and quantitative metrics and research methodologies to measure and guide the desired transformation at individual but also society level.

Current research heavily focuses on measuring transformation at an individual level and only a short period after the experience (Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023). The proposed mindset implies future research to use longitudinal studies looking at change at various

	Theoretical implications	Managerial implications
<p><i>Phenomenon:</i> <i>conceptualization of experiences</i> Humanized experiences: state-of-mind guiding customers' and companies' activities/ purpose</p>	<p>Why experience research can facilitate change in business/ consumer markets? To what extent can experience research influence education paradigms to facilitate shifts in mindset? To what extent can experience research drive and nurture mindset shift in other disciplines?</p>	<p>In what ways can tourism/hospitality organizations and destinations set/ adjust their purpose in line with socioeconomic trends and technological challenges? How do tourism and hospitality companies embed their corporate purpose within value chain activities and functions, e.g. marketing, HR and accounting? What should tourism/hospitality companies do to implement their purpose adequately?</p>
<p>Theoretical approaches</p>	<p>In what ways experience research can embed findings and approaches from other disciplines to understand the increasing complexity and implications of "new" experiences, specifically the ones supported and generated by technologies? To what extent adopting multi, cross-, inter or even antidisciplinary approaches can contribute to the advance of knowledge of experience management? What are the moral, legal, ethical, security and privacy issues introduced by technologies in experience research? How does experience research that uses technology serve humanity?</p>	<p>How to design and deliver humanized experiences through synergies and collaborations with organizations beyond the wider tourism industry (e.g. creative industries, food industry and nonprofit organizations)? How do we endeavor collaborations with technology-related companies to address the increased digitalization of experiences? What is the digital corporate responsibility of organizations using technology in experience management, and how can they monitor and implement it?</p>
<p>Contextualization/ operationalization and frameworks of humanized experiences</p>	<p>In what ways can humanized experiences be interpreted and implemented within various cultural contexts respecting and appreciating local cultural values and meanings? Why humanized experiences appeal and drive a shift in mentality and behavior of various generations of tourists? In what ways can different experiential components (physical and digital contexts) interact with each other and contribute to well-being and transformation?</p>	<p>How do tourism/hospitality organizations from various contexts/ settings (e.g. attractions, destinations, accommodation, cruising, restaurants and food/wine tourism, etc.) implement humanized experiences? What tools, frameworks and guidelines can organizations use to guide and inspire their humanized experience actions? What new knowledge, skills and (technological) competencies tourism and hospitality organizations need to acquire and/or develop to implement humanized experiences?</p>

Table 1.
Humanized perspective to experience research: questions related to theoretical and managerial implications

(continued)

	Theoretical implications	Managerial implications
Methodology	<p>How to develop longitudinal research studies, new scales and metrics to measure/monitor humanized experiences impacts: the betterment of people and communities' well-being (i.e. micro and macro impact) across time, industries, socioeconomic systems and cultures; driving socioeconomic change, update of institutions, mindsets, values, beliefs and lifestyles?</p> <p>In what ways can new technology-generated/collected data be used to design humanized experiences and measure their impact?</p>	<p>In what ways can tourism/hospitality organizations change mindsets, measurement/reporting tools and methodologies to monitor and boost their performance and impact beyond economic benefits so that they also consider their impact and contribution on sustainable goals, well-being of people and communities, as well as socioeconomic change?</p>

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 1.

longer-term windows, both at individual and societal levels, aiming to understand and unravel the interrelations between individual and community/societal transformation. More research is warranted at the postexperience stage to understand what can facilitate or inhibit individual/societal change after the experience. From a practical perspective, companies should invest in embedding a humanized perspective within the fabric of their experience design, including training their service staff on the required humanized mindsets and skills (e.g. empathy, responsibility and philosophical values). Research should help identify needs for new skills and job descriptions for which companies need to educate and attract relevant talent. Table 1 summarizes some of the major theoretical and practical implications that humanized experiences entail for academics and professionals guiding their future actions.

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