FÁILTE GO SLÁINTE:

UNDERSTANDING THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE CONCEPT

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Abstract

The Tourism Policy Review Group's "Vision for Irish Tourism 2003-2012" identified that tourism is increasingly driven by more demanding customer requirements, emphasising the need for the Irish tourism industry to provide compelling tourist experiences. In parallel, there has been an emerging consensus in the experience and service development literature that it is not sufficient to invest money in the design of a service, the focus must be on the design and implementation of memorable personal experiences that meet or exceed the expectations of customers (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). However, despite the importance the literature ascribes to the experience concept there is an imbalance in existing work as the area of experiential tourism services has dealt primarily with the characteristics of experiences (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2004; Gupta & Vajic, 2000; Carbone & Haeckel, 1994), or on the enhancers and inhibitors to experience delivery (Anderson et al., 2008) or on the benefits of experience delivery (Voss, 2004; Pullman & Gross, 2004) but with scant attention to conceptualising the tourist experience. It is widely acknowledged that the field of experience creation and design would benefit from further theoretical investigation (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2000; Pullman and Gross, 2003; Stuart and Tax, 2004).

Drawing from prior work found in the tourism, services, management, marketing, and policy literatures and documents, this paper aims to explore the nature of the tourist experience concept from both an academic and practice perspective in an attempt to develop an integrated understanding of the experience concept. In essence, the primary objective of this paper is to dissect the experience concept proposed by both literature and policy in order to identify its key dimensions from the perspective of the firm.

Key words: tourism, experience concept, small firm

Introduction

Customer experience in general, is a complex construct and has attracted considerable attention in the literature (Atilgan et al. 2003; Aho, 2001, Gnoth et al. 2009). However, there is wide acceptance that the experience concept requires further theoretical development (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2000; Pullman and Gross, 2003; Stuart and Tax, 2004). This is particularly problematic in the tourism arena where the role of the customer (tourist) experience is central, as acknowledged in two key national tourism industry strategy documents: the Tourism Policy Review Group 2003 (TPRG) which defines tourism as: "*the complete experience of the tourist from time of departure from home to the time of return*" (2003:36), and the Tourism Product Development Strategy 2007-2013 (TPDS). The tourism experience concept has been noted by both academic and policy makers as pivotal; however the disparity in the central meaning of the concept remains obscure (Jennings et al. 2009). From an Irish perspective, academics, industry partners and policy makers acknowledge the importance of the 'tourist experience' and its significance in the current economic climate however the incongruence between them has resulted in a fuzzy understanding of the concept. Therefore, this paper integrates a large volume of heterogeneous literature drawing from numerous disciplines providing a conceptual framework of the position and role of various components of the tourist experience from both an academic and policy perspective.

In recent years tourism in Ireland has become one of the most important economic sectors accounting for a total revenue of €6.3 billion (4% of GNP) as well as €1.5 billion in tax revenue which amounts to 128,400 jobs in the accommodation and food sector alone (Tourism Renewal Group (TRG), 2009). However, the Tourism Policy Review Group's "*Vision for Irish Tourism 2003 - 2012*" identified that international tourism is increasingly driven by more demanding customer requirements, with greater emphasis on unique experiences, authenticity and emotional involvement. This assertion was echoed in the subsequent Fáilte Ireland Tourism Product Development Strategy 2007 - 2013 that stated, "…*the future for tourism lies in providing those experiences in a way which meets the key needs of these customers*". This line of reasoning is

consistent with the experience and new service development literature, where there has been an emerging consensus that for organisations who want to become more competitive, it is not sufficient to invest money in the design of a service, the focus has to be on design and implementation of memorable personal experiences (Verma et al. 2002). However, numerous authors, (Zehrer 2009; Knutson & Beck 2003) have argued that significant gaps exist in both academic and practitioner knowledge on the understanding of the nature and design of creating customer experiences.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of the tourist experience concept from both an academic and practice perspective in an attempt to develop an integrated understanding of the experience concept. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section offers an insight into the academic rigour and extensiveness followed for the purpose of this paper. Next, a synthesised discussion on the reviewed tourism literature that conceptualises the experience concept is presented. This is subsequently followed by reviewing the policy perceptive on the concept. Based on the foregoing analysis, an integrated understanding of the experience concept and its key dimensions is discussed. In the concluding section, observations are drawn for future empirical research in understanding the experience concept for the small tourism firm.

The Reviewed Literature

The review focuses on empirical research and conceptualisations reported by researchers and policy makers published in a wide range of journals, books, working papers, and policy documents. Although this may have led to some variation in quality, the key consideration was whether the study contributed to the stock of knowledge on understanding the tourism experience concept and its key dimensions. It is also important to note that on occasion, findings from research in other areas are also included in this review, because in their course of discussion on topics, such as, marketing, retail, management and services; they may have identified or addressed issues that impact on the experience concept, or, provided context or corroboration for work in the area, and so warrant inclusion. In addition, it is also important for the reader to be aware that when conducting a conceptual review, some degree of arbitrariness in

the selection of articles, books, and working papers is inevitable. Indeed, with any synthesis, decisions have to be made about what is central to a topic, and so not all reviewed articles or policy documents are referred to in the paper. Yet, the material retrieved and examined is extensive. Furthermore, at all times and to the best of the authors' knowledge, concepts, quotes, and hypothesis extracted from articles, books, policy documents were used in their proper context. In addition, support material is referenced in order to ensure that the authors' interpretation of other researchers' work is appropriate and accurate.

The Tourist Experience Literature

The tourism experience concept is prevalent in tourism literature; however like the 'experience' concept the central meaning remains elusive (Jennings et al., 2009) as it is implicitly assumed as opposed to defined (Jennings, 2006). This ambiguity is consistent with the varying definitions of the concept proffered by Irish tourism policy makers which are further developed in this paper (see table 2). Indeed there is a general consensus that the area of tourist experiences is 'under researched' within the tourism domain (Larsen, 2007). The lack of understanding amongst academics has resulted in an unclear message being communicated to practitioners, and as the provision of an attractive value proposition for tourism enterprises is dependent on the tourist experience (Zehrer, 2009), the lack of insight into the nature of this experience limits the enterprise's ability to develop an effective experience management strategy. Therefore in order to explicate the tourism experience concept a number of key themes are presented in table 1. These themes are developed to gain a clearer insight into the true meaning of the tourist experience.

Table 1. Overview of literature on aspects of the tourist experience

Theme	Study
Ambiguous understanding of the tourism experience concept	Jennings et al. 2009; Jennings (2006); Zehrer (2009); Quan & Wang (2004); Oh et al. 2007; Ritchie & Hudson 2009; Arnould & Price 1993; Zehrer 2009.
Social Science Approach	Quan & Wang 2004; Mossberg 2007; McCabe 2002; Cohen 1972; Cohen 1979; Turner & Ash 1975.
Marketing/Management Approach	Quan & Wang 2004; Oh et al, 2007; Otto & Ritchie 1996; Mossberg 2007; Brunner-Sperdin & Peters 2009
Involvement	Brunner-Sperdin & Peters 2009; Oh et al. 2007; Mossberg 2007; Pine & Gilmore 1999, 1998; Larsen 2007
Emotional Elements	Oh et al. 2007; Otto & Ritchie 1996; Mossberg 2007; Aho 2001; Pine & Gilmore 1998; Graburn 2001; Holbrook & Hirschmann 1982; Pullman & Gross 2003
Social Inclusion	White & White 2009; Otto and Ritchie 1996; Murphy 2001
Environment to Experience	Mossberg 2007; Oh et al. 2007; Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009.
Experience embedded in long term memory	Czikszentmihalyi 1990; Larsen 2007;

In order to analyse the tourism experience literature, key themes are developed to explicate the concept. The following themes are discussed; emotional elements & social inclusion, environment to experience, involvement, social science and marketing management approach, experience embedded in long term memory. Although this list is not exclusive, it provides ample scope for outlining the considerable gap that exists in the tourism experience literature of the nature of tourist experience creation.

Emotional Elements & Social Inclusion: Consumption of services can be driven by many different motives (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009), however, tourists usually consume services to stimulate emotions (Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Tourists by their very nature consume and therefore experience at all times during their journey (Mossberg, 2007). Indeed there is also an opportunity for the tourist to interact with others which provide an opportunity for social interaction and inclusion (White & White, 2009; Murphy, 2001). Jackson

et al. (1996) used critical incident theory to record positive and negative tourism experiences and found that tourists are more likely to attribute the cause of positive experiences to themselves and more likely to attribute the cause of negative experiences to external factors.

Environment to Experience: It is crucial to note that the tourist provider cannot provide the experience for the tourist but only provide a set of circumstances or environment in which tourists can actually have an experience; therefore it is vital that a tourism provider knows how to provide circumstances that will enhance the experience of the tourist (Mossberg, 2007). Otto and Ritchie (1996) found six fundamental dimensions of the tourist experience construct; a hedonic dimension, an interactive/social dimension, novelty seeking/escape dimension, a comfort dimension, a safety dimension, a stimulating/challenge seeking dimension. Those tourism providers seeking to provide a quality experience must consider incorporating all of these dimensions.

Involvement: Furthermore, Aho (2001) developed four core elements of the tourist experience namely; emotional experiences; learning; practical experiences; and transformational experiences. However, as tourist experiences transpire in short interrupted encounters rather than over an extended period, a precise understanding of the actual experience remains obscure (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). Indeed, to add to the complexity a tourist may be more motivated by the "pre-experience" through powerful mental and emotional images of the expected experience rather than the physical characteristics of a destination (Oh et al., 2007). Indeed, Urry (2002) posits that tourism incorporates both landscapes and "*sensescapes*" which involves various senses as an important component of the tourist experience.

Social Science and Marketing Management Approach: To decipher the tourist experience, one must also consider both the social science approach and the marketing/management approach. The social science approach views the tourist experience as 'peak experience' whereas the marketing/management approach views it at the 'consumer experience' (Quan & Wang, 2004). Simplified, from the social science viewpoint, the tourist experience is an escape from the mundane of every day life (Cohen 1972, 1979, Turner & Ash 1975), it is in sharp contrast to the daily experience of the tourist (Mossberg, 2007), although, to a certain extent everything has become an experience, even the conventional 4-S paradigm (sun, sea, sand, sex) represents an experience that is in contrast from every day life (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009). From the marketing/management lens, it is the consumption of the experience with the tourist as consumer

(Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Oh et al., 2007; Mossberg 2007), as tourists are recognised as consumers as they are involved in various service exchange relationships (Mossberg, 2007) and experiences necessitate the involvement and participation of the tourist (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009). Although this means that individual tourists can react in a different way to the same events and stimuli (Graburn, 2001). Indeed, tourism service providers must aim to engage all five senses of the tourist to surprise them over and over again (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Synnott, 1993; Wang, 1996). Mosberg (2007) further developed a conceptual model of proposed factors influencing the consumer experience within a tourism context and suggested that a theme or story about a tourist attraction or destination allowed for more meaningful experiences for tourists. This allows for a verbal and visual representation which is hopefully received as a positive experience for the tourist. Essentially, a tourist seeks out engaging experiences accompanied with the goods and/or service element of the offering (Oh et al., 2007).

However it must be noted that the tourist experience is a combination of the 'peak experience' which is escaping from the humdrum of everyday life (Quan & Wang, 2004) and the "supporting experiences" such as eating and sleeping (McCabe, 2002). These supporting experiences can enhance the peak experience, they can also fulfil any perceived deficiency in the peak experience. Indeed these peak and supporting experiences can be interchangeable (Mossberg, 2007). However, the belief that tourism is an escape from the mundane of everyday life has been challenged by various scholars (Uriely, 2005), as experiences such as gazing at distant sights (Urry, 1990) and engaging in facets of other cultures are now currently available through various means in everyday life (Lash and Urry, 1994). In fact many tourist related experiences can be acquired without travelling to different destinations in the current era of mass media (Uriely, 2005). This further adds to the complexity of the tourist experience, as it can occur in an infinite range of places and is not limited to one specific place or encounter (O'Dell, 2005).

Experience Embedded in Long Term Memory: From a psychological approach Larsen (2007) has suggested that the tourist experience concept includes, expectations, events and memories, indeed the following definition is proffered; "a *tourist experience is a past personal travel-related event strong enough to have entered long-term memory*" (Larsen, 2007:15) meaning a more long term focus is required to understand the tourist experience. Indeed, Csikeszentmihalyi (1990) describes the optimal experience as an escape form the ordinary where there is a sense of exhilaration and enjoyment that becomes a landmark in an individual's memory of what life should be like. Brunner-Sperdin & Peters (2009) approach the concept from a different lens

stating that service delivery is critically important in customer's service experience, highlighting particular interest in operational, organisational and personal characteristics. These can be divided into 'hardware' which is the service environment where the touristic performance is presented; 'humanware' refers to human resource management which includes the customers, the employees and the service performance; and 'software' which complements both hardware and humanware with technology and process management to ensure memorable experiences are proffered to tourists.

Conclusion: There is general acceptance that the tourist experience is critically important, however the disparity amongst academics has resulted in a 'fuzzy' understanding of the concept. This highlights a significant gap in the academic literature as there is a failure to inform practitioners of the core meaning of the experience concept in a clear cohesive manner. For practitioners to incorporate the experience concept into their offering, academics must provide a prescriptive construal of the tourist experience concept. We must now look to the tourism policy documents to see if they provide a clear understanding of the concept for practitioners.

The Tourist Experience – Policy Viewpoint

There are several key policy documents in Irish tourism that highlight the importance of the tourist experience and its impact on the industry. In fact the 'tourist experience' has become a 'buzz' word not only in policy documents but is consistently used by representatives of the various tourism policy groups when speaking about the Irish tourism. With the extensive use of this concept, the perceived wisdom would be that it's central meaning is easily understood, however this is not in fact the case. Therefore, an analysis of tourism policy documents is necessary to highlight the incongruity of the tourist experience concept.

The Tourism Policy Review Group (TRPG) (2003) state that identifying and analysing the Irish tourism experience is crucially important in the formulation of policy and shaping the competitive position of the industry. Irish tourism therefore must ensure that it provides the best overall experience to the customer at a competitive price, thus tourism enterprises must ensure that they provide a positive customer experience that is perceived as good value (Tourism Review Group (TRG), 2009). However, it is the quality of the tourist experience that will determine repeat visits to a particular destination; these experiences must be positive and

memorable but ultimately unique in order to gain competitive advantage when compared to other destinations (Tourism Action Plan Implementation Group (TAPIG) (2006)). Indeed, a key proposition to consider here is whether the perceived experience before the trip matches or exceeds the actual experience of the tourist. The result of this could be utilised to realign the positioning of Ireland as a destination which could positively affect the actual experience of individual tourists.

The TPRG (2003:36) define the tourism product as "*the complete experience of the tourist from time of departure from home to the time of return*", a view furthered echoed by TSIG (2008: 6) stating that "*the tourism product is complex, encompassing the total experience of visitors from the stage of initial interest in a potential destination, to decision to visit, to making of travel arrangements, local engagement and return home*". However the Tourism Product Development Strategy (TPDS) (2007: 15) views the tourist experience as not "*just a trip*" but one that incorporates a more "*memorable and quality based experience*". A synopsis of definitions is presented in table 2 to highlight the 'fuzziness' of the tourist experience concept in policy documents

Table 2. Definitions of the Tourist Experience from Irish Tourism Policy Documents.

Report	Year	Agency	Definition
Tourism Product Development Strategy 2007 – 2013 **(TPDS)**	2007	Fáilte Ireland	Ireland needs to develop products and experiences which appeal to consumers in a marketplace which is increasingly competitive and stimulating. Customers no longer want 'just a trip' but are looking for a memorable and quality-based experience. The future for tourism lies in providing those experiences in a way which meets the key needs of these customers
Tourism Renewal Group. New Horizons for Irish Tourism (Mid-Term Review) **(TRG)**	2009	Tourism Renewal Group	Whatever the form of tourism, the customer is ultimately seeking a positive experience – whether it be a golf game, whitewater kayaking, a good meal, a restful place to stay, spa treatment or a rewarding business trip. Providing the best possible experience for a competitive price is the key to success. Equally the key to success at enterprise level is the customer experience of the service and perception of value offered. The group classed the Customer Experience under four broad headings - Getting customers to choose Ireland and come here - Giving customers what they seek in Ireland - Helping tourism enterprises to make the most of the customer experience - Focusing on our best prospects
Tourism Strategy Implementation Group **(TSIG)**	2008	Tourism Policy Review Group	Continuous product development and innovation are central to the competitiveness of any business including those in tourism. The tourism product is complex, encompassing the total experience of visitors from the stage of initial interest in a potential destination, to decision to visit, to making of travel arrangements, local engagement and return home … the people in tourism are at the heart of the tourist experience in Ireland. They are the ultimate determinant of the quality of that experience
Building Ireland's Smart Economy **(BISE)**	2008	Dept. of An Taoiseach	*No definition or reference to the tourist experience.*
Tourism Policy Review Group. New Horizons for Irish Tourism. An Agenda for Action. **(TPRG)**	2003	Tourism Policy Review Group	…. The tourism product can be best described as "the complete experience of the tourist from time of departure from home to the time of return" .. the tourism experience embraces a number of inter-related elements such as people and pace, place, facilities/services and accessibility.
Tourism Action Plan Implementation Group **(TAPIG)**	2006	Tourism Policy Review Group	The interaction of visitors with people in Ireland lies at the heart of the tourism experience. Wherever visitors go, it is the quality of their experience, at any particular destination, that will determine whether they will return or recommend Ireland to their friends. Ireland's tourism product, based around the three pillars of people, place and culture, is the fundamental determinant of the customer experience on which the success of the Irish tourism industry rests. (competitive advantage)….. can only come from providing visitors with memorable, positive experiences – particularly those that relate to what is different or unique about Ireland
Irish Tourism Industry Confederation **(ITIC)**	2009	Industry Partners	Ireland also scores highly as being perceived as having 'lots of things to see and do' together with the expectation of a 'friendly people' experience.

As alluded to earlier, reference to the tourist experience is prevalent in Irish tourism policy documentation; however similar to the tourism literature, the disparity in its meaning is still quite vague. In order to assimilate the heterogeneous nature of the tourist experience concept, a number of themes from key policy documents are developed in table 3 for the purpose of this study.

Table 3. The Tourist Experience - Key Themes Developed from Irish Policy.

Report	Year	Definition	Importance	Interaction with People	Product	Market Position	Value for Money	Model of Tourism Experience
Tourism Renewal Group (TRG)	2009	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Irish Tourism Industry Confederation	2009	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Tourism Strategy Implementation Group (TSIG)	2008	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Building Ireland's Smart Economy (BISE)	2008				✓	✓	✓	
Tourism Product Development Strategy (TPDS)	2007	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Tourism Action Plan Implementation Group (TAPIG)	2006	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tourism Policy Review Group (TPRG)	2003		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The TPRG (2003) document forms the basis for both the TAPIG (2006) & the TSIG (2008) which are subsequent interim reports.

People: Although there are numerous similarities in the core meaning of the tourist experience concept, there is still a significant diversity. The heart of the Irish tourist experience though lies in the interaction of visitors with the people of Ireland, highlighting that the tourism industry incorporates the attitudes, competencies, enterprise, innovation, hospitality and friendliness of the people which becomes an inherent component of the tourism product offering (TAPIG, 2006). Similarly, the TSIG (2008) acknowledges that people are the definitive determinant of the actual quality of the experience. Indeed, a recent Fáilte Ireland publication[1] stated that cultural tourism encapsulates the wide variety of experiences available to a visitor allowing for destinations to be easily distinguishable as these experiences "*are defined by the lifestyles, heritage, landscape, arts, traditions and customs of that destination – and not least by interaction with its people*". However, the diversity of labour in the workforce has affected how some tourists perceive the "Irishness" of their experience (TRG, 2009).

Product: TPDS (2007) highlights the importance of developing tourism products and experiences which have high appeal in an ever increasing competitive market. Essentially, the future of Irish tourism lies in the ability to provide experiences that meet the key needs of the discerning tourist. TAPIG (2006) further assert that an emerging trend in international tourism is a greater interest in authentic experiences. Innovation is therefore required to re-invigorate existing attractions and facilities in order to create an experience for the visitor as opposed to 'just a visit'. TPDS (2007) further emphasises that tomorrow's tourist will be much more demanding and will have a higher expectation of the product offering than in the past as they look for quality experiences when travelling. This lends to the view that tourists seek "*short, quality intensive, and life enriching travel experiences*" (TPDS, 2007:14). Indeed, the TPDS (2007) states that a major change on how we approach the development of tourism in Ireland is required in order to offer more holistic experiences, this will invariably affect the co-operation between tourism providers and government departments. TPDS (2007) also acknowledges that in order to create meaningful authentic experiences, Ireland must provide world-class tourism products and services. Indeed the TRG (2009) posit that their key focus encapsulates the tourist and their experience as customers. But what is the Irish tourist looking for? Is it an escape from the mundane of everyday life or is it the consumption of the experience that is more important?

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[1] Fáilte Ireland (2010) Your Guide to Fáilte Ireland Services 2010

(as per Quan & Wang, 2004). It must also be acknowledged that there me be a variation between the domestic tourist and the overseas tourist.

Market Position: The Tourism Strategy Implementation Group (TSIG) (2008) offer an alternative viewpoint highlighting that the tourism product is complex in that it encompasses the total experience from the stage of initial interest, to organising the trip, to engagement in the destination, to the eventual return home for the visitor, making market positioning critically important. This is a view also held by the TRG (2009) asserting that the customer experience can be classed into four different categories including, getting customers to choose Ireland, giving tourists what they seek in Ireland, helping tourism enterprises to make the most of the customer experience and focusing on our best prospects. However, this is in contrast to the TPDS (2007) assertion that the tourist is looking for brief, quality concentrated, life stimulating experiences. Thereby, the question arises as to whether the tourist considers their experience to be the overall experience from the time they start thinking about making a trip to there eventual return home or whether they view it as a number of sub-experiences during the course of their trip. Indeed, this is in contrast with the view held by Larsen (2007), asserting that the tourist experience is one that has been strong enough to have entered long term memory.

The TPRG (2003) assert that the tourist experience embraces a number of interrelated elements including people and pace, place, accessibility, facilities/services, value for money and security. Although the weighting of importance of each variable will vary, it is vital that the tourism experience meets customer expectations. Likewise the TAPIG (2006) state that Irelands tourism product is formulated through three distinct pillars of people, place and culture which is the basis of the customer experience from which the success of the tourism industry is derived. This ideology is further addressed by the TPDS (2007) as they developed a model to explicate the shift in focus from identifying tourist's needs to creating new tourism experiences, this evolution allows tourism providers to 'bundle' tangible products with the 'softer' intangible elements to provide target segments with diverse experiences.

Value for Money: Although value for money has always been an important issue in the tourism industry, the current economic climate means that this is now pivotal to ensure future survival (TRG, 2009). However, it is critically important also to recognise that it is the tourist's perception of the experience and perception of the value offered that is the fundamental issue (TRG, 2009). In the current global competitive marketplace, it is essential to provide not only positive visitor experiences but also provide good value for money (TAPIG, 2006). Indeed, providing value for money is the ultimate objective and responsibility of any business to ensure continued existence regardless of the business environment it operates (TSIG, 2008). Therefore, Irish tourism must provide experiences that are both stimulating and increasingly competitive (TPDS, 2007). However, Fáilte Ireland's recent Visitor Attitude Survey (2009) highlighted that there is still a perception that Ireland is less attractive in value terms and this needs to be improved. A critical assessment is required here to assess the factors that impact this perception. According to the survey, the cost of living is viewed as the biggest disadvantage to Ireland as a destination, it is therefore critically important to understand the tourist expectations prior to the trip and how the experience can be positioned in order for expectations regarding value for money can be improved. This is essential for future survival of the industry as value for money is one of the principal components of Ireland's tourism product, which is a major element of the overall experience (TPRG, 2003).

Policy Conclusion: Irish tourism policy documentation has highlighted the importance of the tourist experience with various definitions presented. Interaction with the Irish people is at the core of the experience, and the actual tourism product as well as the market positioning of the experience are fundamental elements, although there is still ambiguity regarding the core meaning of the tourism product. Similarly, customer perception of value for money is also crucial in order for Irish tourism to be competitive within the global market. Although, developing the 'customer experience' is a major theme in the '*modus operandi*' of tourism policy makers in Ireland, a clear concise definitive understanding of the concept remains unclear. Indeed, Building Irelands Smart Economy (BISE) (2008) acknowledges and articulates the need for Ireland to develop a 'smart economy' in order to reorganise the economy to ensure the prosperity of the Irish people. Although, the need to improve tourism facilities and attractions and make Ireland a destination of choice for the international traveller is explicated, surprisingly, there is no recognition or reference made to the importance of developing or enhancing the Irish tourist experience. This is in line with a supplier viewpoint as there is a natural proclivity to use a

particular product to define tourism, although this is useful, the need to define the tourism product as the complete experience of the tourist is paramount to gain a more holistic understanding of the tourist experience concept (OECD, 2004). It is now evident that there is a significant gap in both tourism literature and policy in their understanding and delineation of the nature of the tourist experience concept. Therefore it is necessary to take a step back and analyse the experience literature to gain a clearer understanding of the experience construct in order to inform the tourist experience concept.

Insights from the Services Literature

The 'experience' concept is prevalent in academic literature, therefore in order to explicate the tourist experience concept, it is necessary to combine the most salient themes from the services literature for a more rigorous understanding of the tourist experience concept. There has been some recent significant work on the nature of customer experience within the retail context, in particular an important study by Verhoef et al. (2009). The authors take an holistic perspective of customer experience, acknowledging that it must encompass not only the factors such as service interface and price which are under the control of the organisation, but also the 'uncontrollables' such as influence of other consumers. Although interaction and social inclusion are deemed important in tourism (White & White 2009; Otto & Ritchie 1996; Murphy, 2001), it is essential to emphasise that this might not always be positive. Indeed interaction with others could totally enhance the tourist experience or have a completely negative impact. Tourism policy documents highlight the importance of interaction with the Irish people (TPDS, 2007; TPRG, 2003) but again this is an 'uncontrollable' element that may not always have a positive effect on the tourist experience.

Recent research highlights a paradigm shift resulting in the concept of consumption being developed into the holistic experience (Verhoef, 2009), which involves the person as opposed to the customer (LaSalle and Britton, 2003) whereby creating added value is not just the selling of a memorable experience to the customer but enabling the person to live and breath every moment of the relationship with a company in way that meets or even exceeds their expectations (Gentile *et al.* 2007*)*. This is consistent with Czikszentmihalyi (1990) and Larsen (2007) with the tourist having exhilarating experiences that can be easily recalled from memory. Indeed the TPDS

(2007) also acknowledge the need for memorable high quality experiences. However, an offering must also provide a strong sensorial component focusing on sight, sound, touch, taste and smell so as to provoke aesthetical pleasure, excitement and satisfaction (Gentile et al., 2007). The sensorial component is seen by many as a key component in the construct of an experience (Schmitt, 1999; Gentile et al., 2007; Tavassoli, 1998). This is consistent in the tourism literature (Oh et al, 2009; Urry, 2002) however it again highlights a gap in the policy documents and presents an avenue for further research.

An experience is inherently personal and can engage or involve an individual at different levels namely, rational, emotional, sensorial, physical and also spiritual (Schmitt, 1999). This provides an interesting insight into the experience concept and poses the question of how the level of involvement can impact on the tourist experience. Although, emotions (Oh et al. 2007; Mossberg 2007; Pullman & Gross 2003) and involvement (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters 2009; Pine & Gilmore 1998; 1999) are prevalent themes in the tourism literature, there is a significant gap in the policy documents and highlights a key area for further attention. Fundamentally, customers always have an experience, it is inherent (Berry & Carbone 2007), they can be positive, negative or indifferent, whenever they purchase a product or service (Berry *et al.* 2002). From a behavioural science perspective perception of the experience is reality meaning that the most important thing is how the consumer interprets the interaction with the organisation (Chase & Dasu, 2001). This has also been acknowledged by the TRG (2009) with the perception of value for money being fundamentally important. Indeed, Fáilte Ireland's Visitor Attitude Survey (2009) highlighted that Ireland is still perceived as poor value. The critical point here is to establish the determinants of this perception and develop a strategy to change it, resulting in a more positive experience for the tourist.

Services provide for many more customer "touch points" than that of manufactured goods, these can essentially be seen as discrete sub experiences which are the individual part experiences that form the overall experience for the costumer (Berry et al. 2006). Indeed, it is these touch points or set of interactions between the customer and any part of an organization that formulates the customer experience (Gentile et al., 2007; Addis & Holbrook, 2001; LaSalle & Britton, 2003). The overall tourist experience can therefore be viewed as a tourist's interaction with all "touch points" that the tourist has from time of departure to time of return (TRPG, 2003). This adds to the multi layered complexity of the tourist experiences which is not sufficiently dealt with in the tourism literature.

Experience 'clues' can enhance an experience by influencing the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of a customer, these clues are embedded in the service delivery allowing the consumer to organise and process them to formulate their own unique experience (Berry et al., 2006). A trigger or experience clue is anything that can be perceived or sensed by an individual and carries a message suggesting something to the consumer (Berry et al., 2002). Clues are organised into a set of impressions for an individual and can be either rational or emotional (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994). It is the combination of clues and messages that create the customer experience (Berry & Carbone, 2007) allowing an organisation to coordinate a series of clues that meet or exceed the expectations of an individual. Clues generally fall into three main categories; functional clues, mechanic clues, and humanic clues (Haeckel et al. 2003). The overall experience is based on customers perception of the technical quality of the offering (functional clues), the sensory presentation of the offering (mechanic clues) and the behaviour or appearance of the service providers (humanic clues)(Berry et al., 2002). Delivering various clue categories must be synergetic rather than being additive allowing for synthesis of information pertaining to a cohesive and compelling storey to be delivered (Berry & Carbone, 2007). However, there is a gap in both the tourism literature and policy documents regarding experience clues. Indeed, experience clues may provide valuable insight into how a tourist provider can create clues to provide an environment for the tourist to experience; this can also be true for a particular destination. Although the need to provide an environment to allow the tourist to experience is alluded too (Mossberg 2007; Oh et al. 2007), the need for greater understanding of the impact of clues needs to be further developed. From a policy perspective how '*au fait*' are policy makers with the impact of clues being interpreted by tourists in particular destinations. Clues interpreted by potential tourists in marketing campaigns may also have a significant impact on their expectations or their "*pre-experience*" (Oh et al. 2007) which may not mirror their actual experience resulting in either an extremely positive or extremely negative experience. The fundamental point is that neither academics nor policy makers have addressed the issue of design, implementation or review of experience clues for a particular tourism enterprise or destination which could be one of the key components of the overall tourist experience.

Conclusion & Research Agenda

Viewed from a tourism lens it is found that the experience value of tourism products is the overriding factor influencing customers' motivation to buy a service (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters 2009). Although the creation of memorable experiences has been acknowledged in academia and government circles as a key driver of competitiveness in tourism firms, few research agendas have addressed this issue. There has been extensive research on the tourist experience; however the components that constitute the tourist experience remain puzzling (Quan & Wang, 2004). Arnould and Price (1993) acknowledge the importance of studying the tourist experience rather than the tourist product itself. Indeed, experience is central to the tourism phenomenon and research, however "*it has defied a unifying definition and operationalization*" (Oh et al., 2007:120). Therefore in order to explicate the tourist experience concept, literature from various disciplines must be deciphered and incorporated to ensure a much more rigorous and robust understanding of the concept. Further empirical research must be undertaken in order to enhance our understanding of the nature of the tourist experience concept. However, at present, as much of the emphasis on the tourist experience construct is descriptive in both the literature and policy documents, it is essential that future research is driven from the tourist perspective in order to develop a more prescriptive construal of the concept.

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