

MOBILE ETHNOGRAPHY AS AN INNOVATIVE TOOL FOR CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE RESEARCH IN TOURISM – A CASE OF THE TOURISM DESTINATION UPPER AUSTRIA

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1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

International tourism is facing growing competition as new destinations are emerging and customers are becoming more demanding (Porter, 1990; Dwyer, Forsyth, & Rao, 2000; Morrison, 2013). The Internet has increased transparency and the access to information and consumers are therefore gaining more power as they are no longer just information seekers and users, but mainly content providers on social media and evaluation platforms (O’Konner, 1999; Buhalis, 2004; UNWTO, 2011; Batinic, 2013; Morrison, 2013). Marketing is therefore concentrating more on customer experience management than customer satisfaction. (Meyer & Schwager, 2007) However managing holiday experiences is still a challenge as various service providers need to cooperate in order to create a high-quality service experience (Morrison, 2013). Another challenge concerns the research of customer experience within destinations and the geographical range of customers (Stickdorn & Frischhut, 2012; Stickdorn, Frischhut, & Schmid, 2014).

2. FROM SERVICE MANAGEMENT TO EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT

Tourism as a service industry implies various peculiarities in comparison to the goods industry. The tourism industry is characterized by perishability (services are produced and consumed at the same time), the lack of storage (an unsold airline ticket is a lost one), inconsistency (it is difficult to guarantee high quality as it depends on the customer’s expectation and perception), asset intensity (hotels need to provide ground, a building and furnishing), dependence on location (it is crucial what the destination itself offers), people-orientation (tourism is all about the interaction of staff and customers), inseparability (travel products are sold first, but consumed at a later stage), intangibility (tourism products cannot be reproduced or reused), inflexibility (a hotel cannot change its capacity in order to react to fluctuations in demand), and imitability (how can a business develop a unique selling proposition which is difficult to copy?) (Chase, 1978; Cowell, 1986; Grönroos, 1998; Bateson, 2002; Middleton et al., 2009). A tourism product in a destination consists of a bundle of service which focuses on a main service framed by auxiliary services (Normann, 2000; Grönroos, 2001; Kandampully, 2002). This bundle is, however, delivered by a number of local service providers within a destination. As destinations are „amalgams of tourism products, which offer an integrated experience to consumers“ (Buhalis, 2000: 97), it is important to take a more holistic view (Palmer & Bejou, 1995; Buhalis & Cooper, 1998; Weaver & Oppermann, 2000).

Therefore, service marketing has to take into account these characteristics more than the goods industry (Shostack, 1977; Grönroos, 1982; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Marketing has seen various shifts in paradigm over the past decades. While at the beginning marketing focused on product brands, in the 1990s it shifted to service-based relationship marketing. In the 2000s, it was customer experience management that replaced this concept (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Maklan & Klaus, 2011). Meyer & Schwager (2007) point out the differences between customer relationship management and customer experience management in subject matter, timing, monitoring, audience, and purpose.

3. CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT

However customer experience management is nothing new. The basis of CEM lies within the theories of consumer behaviour and service quality. Many authors already noticed that consumers buy products in order to satisfy expectations (Parsons, 1934; Keynes, 1936; Abbott, 1955). In their CAB theory (cognition, affect, behaviour) Sheppard, Hartwick, and Warshaw (1988) describe CE as sequences of evaluation of past, present and expected experiences, however only including the rational and not the emotional experience. Customer experience is therefore what companies – also in tourism – are nowadays competing for and becoming crucial for every company's success (Richie & Crouch, 2000, Badgett, Boyce, & Kleinberger, 2007; Klaus et al., 2013; Johnston & Kong, 2011; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Shaw & Ivens, 2005) as it has a great impact on the business performance (Verhoef et al., 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Because of customer's power, dissatisfied customers can become a threat to a company (Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Carroll, 2012).

Definitions of CE, however, are still rather vague (Richardson, 2010; Klaus, 2013). Richardson (2010: Online) marks that "it (CE) is the sum-totality of how customers engage with your company and brand, not just in a snapshot in time, but throughout the entire arc of being a customer." Meyer and Schwager (2007) define customer experience as "the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company". Data about CE is collected as touchpoints, which are "instances of direct contact either with the product or service itself or with representations of it by the company or some third party" (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). A series of touchpoints is then referred to as customer corridor (Meyer & Schwager, 2007) or customer journey (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010). Touchpoints can vary in importance and value, according to the customer's wishes and needs. They can also change within a customer's life (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

Many authors agree that the measurement of CE is rather complex (O'Neill, Palmer, & Charters, 2002). Early work includes the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), which includes the dimensions of reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness. The measurement is carried out by customers assessing these dimensions in comparison to their prior expectations on a five-point Likert scale (Morrison Coulthard, 2004). SERVQUAL received much attention, it has, however, also been criticized for its dimensions, which do not seem to fully cover the complex concept of CE (Sureshchandar, Rajendran, & Anantharaman 2002). Furthermore it does not consider the mix of utilitarian and emotional factors (Chitturi, Raghunathan, & Mahajan, 2008) and focuses too much on the assessment of the service-delivery process through the customer (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Richard & Allaway, 1993). CE however follows the service-dominant logic (Vargo, Stephen, & Lusch, 2008), has a much wider interpretation and involves rational and physical as well as emotional, sensorial and spiritual aspects (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). In addition, multi-channel considerations have to be added (Chandon, Morwitz, & Reinartz, 2005; Sharma & Patterson, 2000) as well as the whole service process from pre- to post-service period (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002; Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008). Different authors worked on overcoming these limitations of SERVQUAL (Bauer, Hammerschmidt, & Falk, 2005; Kheng et al., 2010; Lemke, Clark, & Wilson, 2010; Lo & Chin, 2009; Nantel, 2000). However they all focused on measuring only specific aspects of CE such as customer loyalty or satisfaction (Klaus et al., 2013; O'Loughlin, Szmigin, & Turnbull, 2004, Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009). Klaus & Maklan (2012) developed the EXQ (customer experience quality) as a multi-item scale and multi-dimensional model. Based on Morgan (2007), they define CE as a continuum, namely "an ongoing process of interactions, including gathering of information, evaluation of offerings, physical interactions, purchases, consumption of services, maintenance, and evaluations after consumption" (Klaus et al., 2013: 509f). Therefore CE includes three stages (Voss, Roth, & Chase, 2008): anything that happens before the actual purchase of a service, during the purchase or service delivery itself and after the service period. In the CE continuum, Klaus (2011) proposes that the post-service period turns into a new pre-purchase phase and therefore concludes that a positive CE

increases loyalty and the willingness of recommendation (Brown et al. 2005). „CE is the customers' dynamic continuous evaluation process of their perceptions and responses to direct and indirect interactions with providers and their social environment pre-, during and post-purchase and/or consumption of the offering at any given point in time.“ (Klaus et al., 2013: 518) The application of the customer experience continuum seems to be rather relevant for services, as these are evaluated over all three stages (Klaus & Maklan, 2007; Zeithaml & Valarie, 1988). As already mentioned in the beginning, tourism products consist of a bundle of services provided by various stakeholders. Therefore, in order to study CE, it is necessary to include all interactions between customers and service providers over all three-stages, no matter if on- or offline (Jamal & Naser, 2002; Klaus et al., 2013; Sharma & Patterson, 2000). “The combination of the three dimensions, rather than the addressing of each dimension individually, has a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth“. (Klaus et al., 2013: 517)

Many authors still criticize the scarcity of research on CE (Hill et al., 2002; Roth & Menor, 2003; Stuart & Tax, 2004; Patricio et al., 2008; Verhoef et al., 2009) and the fact, that many methods and tools only focus on single elements of CE (e.g. personas, service delivery process, customer contact intensity) instead of providing a holistic approach (Saffer, 2010; Chase, 1981). While the focus has been strongly on descriptive aspects of CE so far (Weed & Bull, 2004), more recent research puts the measurement of customer experience quality into the centre of attention (Klaus & Maklan, 2012). Most studies on customer experience are still being carried out by classical surveys. These traditional methods of measurement have, however, limitations (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Meyer and Schwager argue that companies collect a lot of data on customer's habits to buy, their incomes and other characteristics, but that they lack data on the emotional level such as the customers' thoughts, emotions caused by the interaction between a product or service and the customer. “Yet unless companies know about these subjective experiences and the role every function plays in shaping them, customer satisfaction is more a slogan than an attainable goal.” (Meyer & Schwager, 2007: 11) Teixeira et al. (2012: 363) argue that CE has to provide a holistic approach through exploratory data collection methods. “(...) there is no systematized representation of a more holistic view of the customer experience to support service design“. They therefore created the customer experience modelling (CEM) which should serve as a method for capturing all elements that shape an experience. CE follows the service-dominant logic of Vargo & Lusch (2004). It is therefore not designed, but co-created through various interactions between the customer and the service provider. All these single service elements along a customer journey need to be taken into consideration (Berry et al., 2002). However, not all of these touchpoints (e.g. the social environment) can be designed, as they are not under the control of the service provider (Verhoef et al, 2009). Consequently we need to design situations, which support the customers in co-creating a desired experience rather than predicted outcomes (Forlizzi & Ford, 2000). Authors claim that service design methods need to focus on a holistic view of CE including all elements and touchpoints and slipping into the shoes of the customer (Berry et al., 2002; Teixeira et al., 2012).

4. MOBILE ETHNOGRAPHY AS AN INNOVATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

Ethnography as a discipline of anthropology focuses on understanding people's behaviour and their relationships by observing them and using various techniques like photo/video observation, observation protocols, ethnographic interviews, reflexive photography, cultural probes or storytelling. One of the major disadvantages of ethnography is the fact that it is very time- and cost-intensive, as researchers have to put much effort into observations and need to be on the spot. This is especially the case in tourism because of the geographical scope and temporal extension of tourist journeys (Agar, 1996; Buscher & Urry, 2009; Segelström, Raijmakers & Holmlid, 2009; Stickdorn, Frischhut & Schmid, 2014). Mobile ethnography as an innovative form of classic ethnography transforms the tourist into a researcher. The tourist can use his own mobile device as a research tool in order to track his journey and document positive as well as negative touchpoints. The sum of experiences will then make up the customer journey. Stickdorn, Frischhut & Schmid (2014: 495) refer to mobile ethnography as “geographically independent ethnographic research for

a specific subject matter through the utilisation of mobile devices.” Thus mobile ethnography helps fostering innovation in self-centred and participatory design (Buscher & Urry, 2009; Segelström & Holmlid, 2011; Stickdorn & Frischhut, 2012). The main advantage of the use of mobile ethnography besides cost and time is the fact that the tourist him- or herself decides what is important for him or her and that data is recorded in real-time and can even be geo-referenced (Stickdorn & Frischhut, 2012; Stickdorn, Frischhut & Schmid, 2014; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010; Mager & Gais 2009). Authors however still disagree whether the research himself should be present during data collection. While Marcus (1995), Watts and Urry (2008) as well as Buscher and Urry (2009) see mobile ethnography as multi-sited and therefore as a walk along ethnographic research, Stickdorn and Zehrer (2009), Segelström and Holmlid (2011) and Stickdorn and Frischhut (2009) follow the concept of self- or auto-ethnography (Coffey, 1999; Alvesson, 2003; Chang, 2008) and claim that the tourist him- or herself collects data without the presence of a researcher. Mobile ethnography has been applied in recent research for various service industries such as the health industry (Rodgers et al., 2005; Connelly et al., 2006; Logan et al., 2007), retail (Kourouthanassis, Giaglis, & Vrechopoulos, 2007) and tourism (Frischhut, Stickdorn, & Zehrer, 2012; Muskat et al., 2013).

5. METHODOLOGY

Mobile Ethnography is a rather young discipline with a clear qualitative focus. To-date only few mobile research tools are available (Segelström & Holmlid, 2012; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010; Stickdorn & Frischhut, 2012). ExperienceFellow is one of them, which offers a free mobile app for customers (in this case tourists) and a web-based software tool for researchers. The tool has already been applied to various studies in order to research customer experience in tourism destinations (Stickdorn & Frischhut, 2012; Stickdorn, Frischhut, & Schmid, 2014). It allows researchers to invite tourists to become “holiday testers” and document their personal customer journey. This is done by adding touchpoints, naming, evaluating and describing them by means of pictures, videos or text. Furthermore for each touchpoint a time stamp and GPS-location is recorded. Once the data is uploaded from the app to the back-end system, research can start analysing the data by tagging and filtering. Moreover all touchpoints can be viewed in a map to identify hotspots within the destination and their performance (ExperienceFellow, 2016a). The Upper Austria Tourism Board is the first of 9 Austrian regional DMO’s on provincial basis to install the position of a “Service Designer” within the organization. As part of their strategic work the DMO launched two research projects, which made use of mobile ethnography. In the first case they evaluated the winter sports product in the Dachstein-Salzkammergut region. In the second case they were looking for improving the touristic experience on the Danube cycling path. The research design followed the approach of mobile ethnography and made use of the ExperienceFellow mobile app (ExperienceFellow, 2016b). While in the first case participants were recruited by the local tourist board or directly in the hotels and received a free cable car ticket as an incentive, participants for the Danube cycle path were recruited by a travel agency and got the rental bike offered for free plus a tablet for documenting their journey.

6. RESULTS

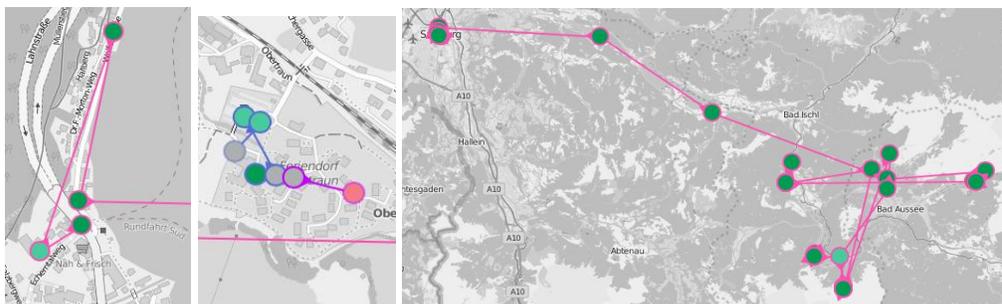
6.1 Dachstein-Salzkammergut

15 participants collected a total of 174 touchpoints. 5 guests had signed up at the first stage, but did not submit any data at the second stage. Participants submitted between 1 to 42 touchpoints, on average this accounts for 12 touchpoints per participant. In comparison to similar projects using the same tool, this is a rather good result with high-quality data. For the holiday evaluation with the ExperienceFellow tool mainly the text and picture functions were used. Only one participant added a video. The overall average emotion value was 1.0 on a scale ranging from -2 to +2. Average emotional values of participants ranged from -0.5 as the worst and 2.0 as the best average value. The vast majority of touchpoints collected were rated very positive (103 out of 174 TP), 33 positive and only 17 neutral, 12 negative and 8 very negative.

As participants choose themselves, what is important and therefore worth mentioning, it is interesting to see which elements of the service chain were evaluated. By far the most evaluations were associated with gastronomy (41), lifts & ski slopes (23), weather (18), accommodation (14), attractions, great views (13 each), thermal bath & swimming pools (10), snowshoe- & winter hiking (9), self-catering (7), signage, relaxation, shopping, rentals and entertainment (4 each). In terms of locations which have been visited outside the area, Salzburg was rated the most (6) followed by Hallstatt (4) (Wolfgangsee and Fuschlsee 1 each). Other evaluations concerned transportation, the fact that there were a lot of Asian guests (in Hallstatt and Salzburg), opening hours (3 each), cross-country skiing, tobogganing, advertising material, churches and local architecture (2 each). Single evaluations were made for mountain rescue, a petrol station, toilets, spotted animals, the tourist information, parking, smoking, medical services, a playground, and the ExperienceFellow tool itself. When looking at the various service providers within the destination, most evaluation concerned gastronomy followed by the cable car company, the accommodation sector and attractions. However it also becomes obvious that other services within the destination like supermarkets, shopping facilities, medical services, petrol stations or even churches are part of the touristic customer journey.

Negative evaluations mainly concerned the cable car: queues at lifts or gondolas (3), crowded or bad condition of slopes and dirty toilets. Single remarks were made for smoking in public places of hotels, bad weather, opening hours of shops and churches, an overpriced cappuccino, the organization of the bus transport from the ski station back to the hotel, a wrong page listing in a destination catalogue. Dissatisfaction also occurred as a guest expected to use the discount card in the thermal bath, which was not accepted. But even personal experiences, which have not been influenced by any service provider, influence the customer journey. This included the fall of a guest while skiing and someone burning his milk. The tracking of GPS data also allows the visualisation of touchpoints on a map. This is especially interesting for destinations to either analyse positive or negative hotspots or also understanding the geographical range of guests. Also personal customer journeys can be visualized (figure 1).

Figure 1. Positive hotspot Hallstatt, negative hotspot Obertraun, longest customer journey (Data visualisation from ExperienceFellow tool, 2016)



6.2 Danube cycle path

10 participants collected a total of 132 touchpoints. The same applies to the Dachstein-Salzkammergut case, 5 guests had signed up at the first stage, but did not submit any data. Participants submitted a minimum of 5 up to a maximum of 25 touchpoints. This means on average every participant uploaded 13 touchpoints. Similarly to the Dachstein-Salzkammergut project, participants mainly added text and pictures as media. There was, however, a difference between the amounts of text added. Participants of the Danube cycle path added much more text at a much higher level of detail. This would even allow giving feedback on single accommodation providers. Therefore also the number of tags used per touchpoint was much bigger. At the same time, this makes it harder to analyse data as many aspects are combined in one touchpoint. The overall

average emotion value was 1.5 (scale -2 to +2). Average emotional values of participants ranged from +1.1 to +2.0. The majority of touchpoints were rated very positive (82 out of 132 touchpoints), 34 positive and only 10 neutral, 4 negative and 2 very negative.

As for categories, most evaluations concerned accommodation, sights on the Danube cycle path (33 each), gastronomy (32), the biking route itself (22), landscape (16), hotel staff (15), breakfast in hotels (13), transportation of bicycles (11), travel documents which guests received beforehand, and the weather (10 each). Other evaluations targeted signage (7), tour description, the arrival, wlan in hotels, swimming possibilities (6 each), hotel bathrooms, hotel location, distribution of bikes, great views (5 each), check-in at the hotel, luggage service and the garden exhibition in Tulln (3 each). The most mentioned locations were Passau (11), Linz (10), Wien, Grein, Niederranna (7 each), Melk (6) and Enns (5). No negative hotspots could be identified. The geographical visualisation showed that some participants even documented their pre-service period (booking decision & process).

Figure 2. Visualization of all touchpoints along the Danube cycle path (Data visualisation from ExperienceFellow tool, 2016)



According to service providers within the destination, again most evaluation concerned accommodation and gastronomy. According to the touristic product many comments targeted the biking route and sights on the Danube cycle path (instead of the cable car company in the other project) as well as in this case the tourist offices which are responsible for signage and maintenance of the cycle path, travel agencies, but also attraction management. Negative evaluations resulted from the biking track itself (too steep), missing signage at a crossing, insufficient directions to a hotel (as it is known amongst the locals under a different name), problems with wlan in hotels, problems with the speedometer on the rental bike (as the size of the tyres was not correct and therefore distances were wrongly calculated) and one accommodation which received bad evaluation from one guest.

The main findings from the two projects were rather diverse for the Tourism board. In the first case, it was interesting to track the radius within which guests move around. This implies that the tourism board needs to work on a supra-regional basis in order to offer a holistic tourism experience. Furthermore it turned out that food and culinary art was a major element of the touristic experience in the Dachstein-Salzkammergut region during the winter season. In the case of the Danube cycle path it was remarkable how the use of ExperienceFellow allowed the project team to become part of the participants' world of images. They themselves claimed that their holiday was experienced a lot more intensely through the use of this app and the documentation of their journey. In addition, the Upper Austrian Tourism Board received important advice on necessary improvement of the cycle path signage (ExperienceFellow, 2016b).

7. DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Mobile ethnography proved to have various advantages in contrast to classic survey studies in tourism. Participants collect data and become researcher themselves while their mobile device functions as the research tool. This allows conducting real-time and in-situ data collection. The tool would in general enable the collection of data throughout all service periods. However this mainly

depends on the time of participant recruitment for the pre-service and on communication for the post-service period. The projects at hand do not include any data for the post-service period. Participants conclude their data collection and upload the data once the holiday is finished. Clearer communication would be necessary in order to include the post-service period as well. The research tool therefore has now included the function to send out push notifications to participants in order to remind them to collect data, upload it or also include touchpoints once they have returned home. The Danube cycle path project also includes touchpoints for the pre-service period as participants were recruited at a very early stage, but not all participants did so. Maybe also clearer communication and instructions are necessary in order to make participants understand what and when they are expected to evaluate their holiday experience.

The data of the Danube cycle path project turned out to be much more detailed. Even though the Salzkammergut-Dachstein project collected a higher number of total touchpoints (174), single touchpoints of the Danube cycle path included much more text and details on various aspects of services (total of 132 touchpoints). When evaluating a whole destination, managers can learn about the geographical range of guest, understand what is important to them, but often the detail level does not allow feedback for single service providers. In the case of the Danube cycle path, however, this was possible due to the vast amount of detailed feedback given by participants. They used the ExperienceFellow tool as a travel diary giving a lot of information on single services (even mentioning prices and directions how to get there).

Participant recruitment proved to be a challenge as already experienced in former research projects. Even though a vast number of participants is not the aim of a qualitative study, these projects have shown that it is crucial to get motivated participants which are willing to take the time to document their experience throughout their holiday. While in former research projects participants needed to have their own smartphone, participants were provided with a new tablet in the case of the Danube cycle path. This might have motivated participants even more to collect high quality data. Incentives have proved to be crucial for participants' willingness to take part in the project and motivation (Stickdorn & Frischhut, 2012; ExperienceFellow, 2016a).

Some touchpoints just include a touchpoint name and evaluation. This very often makes it difficult to understand what customers want to communicate. Misinterpretations might follow. Therefore it is advisable to combine data collected through ExperienceFellow with personal interviews (Stickdorn & Frischhut, 2012). This allows going much more into detail, clarifying aspects of touchpoints and might even include a workshop for future product development. Customers seemed to enjoy being a holiday tester and stated that their holiday experience became even more intense by using ExperienceFellow. Furthermore it is interesting to analyse what forms the holiday experience when there is no specification what to evaluate. Furthermore public services and personal experiences form part of the holiday experience, which are out of the control of service providers.

The analysis function of the back-end ExperienceFellow tool is constantly under development in order to improve researcher's possibilities to get the most out of the data. As touchpoints are rather complex and include various aspects of the holiday experience, it would however be necessary to add a more detailed tagging function. This could include the possibility to not only tag the whole touchpoint, but also selected parts of the text or pictures. Furthermore it would be useful to allow tagging on various levels. In addition to tagging aspects of various services at the first stage, it would be desirable to create a second level of tagging in order to mark which service providers are assigned to single touchpoints.

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