

# Enhancers and tools to improve **luxury customer experience: Hotel managers'** perspective

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**Abstract** | This study aims to explore how luxury hotels create hospitality experiences in order to examine consistency of manager's statements. To this end, the study included a literature review to understand the major approaches used in creating customer experiences. Following this, thirty in-depth interviews were prepared and carried out with thirty international luxury hotel managers in both Brazil and Portugal. The findings reveal that personalized service, brand image, service quality, client contact and adaptation of services are enhancers of customer experience in luxury hotels. These enhancers together with gastronomy, decoration, spa & wellness, staff and social networks are the most mentioned elements, confirming efforts of hotels to integrate experiences as an important role for hospitality industry. As far as one knows, this is the first attempt to explore the perspectives of luxury hotel managers' in creating customer experience using in-depth interview approach and content analysis.

**Keywords** | Experience, Customers, Managers, Luxury, Hotels.

**Resumo** | Este estudo visa explorar como os hotéis de luxo criam experiências na hospitalidade tendo por objetivo analisar a perspetiva dos gestores dos hotéis. Para tal, o estudo inclui uma revisão de literatura para entender as abordagens utilizadas na teoria da experiência do consumidor. Seguido a isto, entrevistas em profundidade foram aplicadas a trinta gestores de hotéis de luxo, no Brasil e em Portugal. Os resultados revelam que os fatores: serviço personalizado, imagem de marca, qualidade no serviço, contato com o cliente e adaptação aos serviços são potenciadores da experiência do consumidor em hotéis de luxo. Estes fatores potenciadores juntamente com a gastronomia, decoração, Spa & bem-estar, *staff* e as redes sociais são os elementos mais mencionados, tudo isso confirma os esforços dos hotéis para integrar as experiências como um importante papel da indústria da hospitalidade. Até onde se sabe, este trabalho possui um caráter inovador ao explorar as perspetivas dos gestores de hotéis de luxo na criação da experiência do consumidor, utilizando-se de entrevistas em profundidade e análise de conteúdo para atingir os resultados apresentados.

**Palavras-chave** | Experiência, Consumidores, Gestores, Luxo, Hotéis.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the World Tourism Organization (2013), luxury tourists represent 3% of all tourists travelling all over the world. The money spent by these tourists, represents twenty five percent of the money in circulation on international travels. Moreover, according to the International Luxury Travel Market (2011), they spent eight times more than usual tourists per day.

Scott, Laws and Boksberger (2009), highlight that western societies devote a considerable portion of resources to pursuit good life, meaning contentment, pleasure, and happiness. For Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, p. 132), the stage experience is characterized with a search by consumers for a "steady flow of fantasies, feelings, and fun". The economy changes, the technology revolution and the increasing of competitiveness in the worldwide markets drive the ongoing search for differentiation. Beyond that, economic values go in a natural progression, from commodities, to goods, to services, and finally to experiences: the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

In luxury hotel market, this perspective that is stressed by some characteristics of luxury customers and providers, could be examples of the search/providing of personalization, authenticity and comfort in services. Considering this scenario, the current study aims to undertake a literature review on customer experience and explore how luxury hotels managers provide memorable experiences. This has resulted in the development of a framework that combines enhancers and tools to improve hospitality experience. Following the introduction, we present the literature review. Then the methodology and findings are reported and finally the conclusions.

## 2. Customer experience

Holbrook and Hirschmann (1982), as well as Schmitt (1999) are among the first researchers

theorizing that consumption has experiential aspects. In the experiential approach, it is necessary to consider the emotional and the irrational side exploiting the intangible elements linked with emotional values (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Schmitt (1999) adds that besides recognizing both the rational and emotional drivers of consumption, experiential marketing is distinct in three more key ways: focusing on consumer experiences, treating consumption as a holistic experience, and using eclectic methodologies.

Holbrook (2000) considers that subjectively-based 'experiential' aspects of the consumption experience, the three F's – fantasy, feelings and fun – were recently extended to four E's – experience, entertainment, exhibitionism and evangelizing (p. 178). This work highlights and examines subjective aspects of consumer behaviour.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) present customer experience as a new economic offering: the experience economy. Schmitt (1999) offers a customer experience management model as a five step program involving an analysis of the customer's world, the author asserts that experience marketing can deliver sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relational value to customers, to which social and informational based value can be added. More recently, Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007) propose a new approach: co-creation between organisations and customers.

## 3. Experiences and the tourism industry

The experience has been used as a vehicle to describe the meaning of various leisure and tourism activities and events. Otto and Ritchie (1996) highlight that tourism holds the potential to elicit strong emotional and experiential reactions by consumers. They stress that utilitarian and rational information processing schemes, which focuses on functional or purely attribute-based elements, are incommensurate with leisure and tourism.

In a marketing perspective, a tourist experience is seen as a consumer experience because the marketing significance of the tourist activity is based in tourist's consumption. Although the tourist consumption goes beyond simply material things, should consider all the emotional aspects involved to understand the entire journey (Mossberg, 2007). This is the reason why focusing on affective and cognitive components is important, even when tourism sectors have a clear functional component to them, as do accommodation and transportation services, experiential benefits will remain a critical part of the process evaluation and consequently of the tourist experience.

The experience is created inside the person depending on the individual's mood, state of mind, and how he/she reacts to the interaction with the staged event (e.g., Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). Therefore, in order to be a successful provider of tourism services, it is fundamental to know how companies can provide circumstances to enhance customer's experiences.

Perceiving the importance of experiences for tourism, several other authors tried to understand their relations. Uriely (2005), for instance, did a review of tourist experience in an academic approach and found that tourist experience emphasizes its distinctiveness from everyday life and tourist search for authentic experiences in travel, what they cannot find in their every-day lives.

Since the last decade of the 20th century, tourism started to be stressed as a post-modern phenomenon and experiences that were once confined to tourism events, are now possible in real life. Tourism experience congregates many leisure activities with work, such as trekking, biking, mountain climbing. Niche tourism emerges as an alternative to the mass tourism. A group of tourists become more environmental-oriented and search for the authentic, such as rural tourism, heritage tourism, eco-tourism (e.g., Rojek 1995; Urry 1990). The simulation or theme tourism also appears to create tourism attractions, such as theme parks (e.g.,

Lash & Urry, 1994; Pretes, 1995). Thus, different types of people desire different modes of tourism.

In this vein, the current notion of tourist experience as a diverse phenomenon was accompanied by another development, in which attention is shifted from the displayed objects provided by the industry to the tourist subjective negotiation of meanings as a determinant of the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). So, the experience is not understood by being provided only through the industry, tourist become a guest and more involved. Thereby, the subjectivity of tourist's mood and needs is the main factor to experience.

More than understanding the meaning of tourist experience, it is also important to find what influences tourist experiences. Otto and Ritchie (1996) point out four important factors influencing the experience: memories, peace of mind, involvement and recognition. In their study, participants confirmed their need to do what they love, to have their imagination stirred and to be thrilled by the service activities. Firstly, tourists want to be able to have memories to keep to themselves and to share with others later on. Secondly, tourists want peace of mind or the need for both physical and psychological safety and comfort. The third factor seems to be related to the process of service delivery than with the outcome, that is, tourists are willing to be active participants in certain service systems, having choice and control in the service offered. On the other hand, they also pointed out the importance of being educated, informed and imbued with a sense of mutual cooperation. Finally, the tourists desire a sense of personal recognition from their service encounters, in such way that they can feel confident that they are being taken seriously.

Mossberg (2007) argues that tourism can be also called as an experience industry linked with the creative industries. The author defines the creative industries as organizations with a creative approach, where the main task is to create or deliver experience in some form. Entertainment and cultural industries are examples of creative industries. Panosso Netto and Gaeta (2010) also highlight that humanity

reached a stage where simple things does not make sense anymore, consumer wants something unique, different, out of common sense and daily life. In tourism, such experience is more than providing a service based on functional and utilitarian attributes. Tourism has a great potential to connect with guest through emotional appeal (e.g., Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Mossberg, 2007).

More recently a new concept emerges in tourism experience, the co-experience. Some authors believe that companies can provide customers with experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2000; Schmitt, 1999), otherwise a more recent comprehension of this field of research consider that experiences are co-created in a relationship between firms and customers.

For Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a, 2004b), creation of value is not about add more components to goods or services, but lies in personalized experiences created through active participation of consumers, where experiences are co-created. According to Panosso Netto and Gaeta (2010), to be an experience, travel should overcome banality and trivial aspects that most times are conventional and stereotyped. So, tourist experience should be based on personal aspects and should seek for moments and places that increase one's personal history; creation of remarkable experience.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) consider tourism as part of experience industry, because hospitality, attractions, retail, events and transportation have in common the fact that they exist to provide customer with experiences. Thus, considering hospitality services, mainly hotels, we can identify in core of these services a hedonic character, because they consist in sell the experience which makes the place enjoyable.

#### **4. Importance of experiences to hospitality (luxury) market**

Experiences are now the core of attention. Marketing researchers and practitioners have

displayed their interest about experiences as the key for understanding and fulfilling customer needs and improving companies' success. Shaw and Ivens (2005) show that 85% of senior business managers believe that differentiating focuses only on the traditional elements, such as price, product and quality, and it is no longer a sustainable competitive advantage, and so, senior managers hold the customer experience as the next competitive battleground. In addition, according to a survey with marketing professionals, 70% of the respondents report the experience factor as being very important to their organizations and indicated their intention to employ it more widely in the future (Bigham, 2008).

For luxury market, price is still a very important component, but values as conspicuous, uniqueness, social, emotional and quality are also important to luxury market, propounding that different consumers have different desires. According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004a, 2004b) perspective, value is embedded in the personalized experiences created through active participation of customer. Value is a co-creation. Therefore, in order to integrate the core components of customer experience and co-creation into the context of tourism hospitality, four main elements arise: (i) connection to customer; (ii) differentiate offering; (iii) competitive advantage; and (iv) value creation.

- i) Customers have specific characteristics, so companies need to be aware for their desires and needs. Instead of treating customers in a massive way it is important to treat them as unique. In order to be connected to customers, it is necessary to understand their lifestyle and get a perception about what kind of experience could be co-created, attempting to personalization and authenticity in services (Williams, 2006).
- ii) Nowadays customers have many options to choice the service but they still seem dissatisfied and a high service quality is always expected, making it difficult for hospitality organizations to differentiate only by quality.

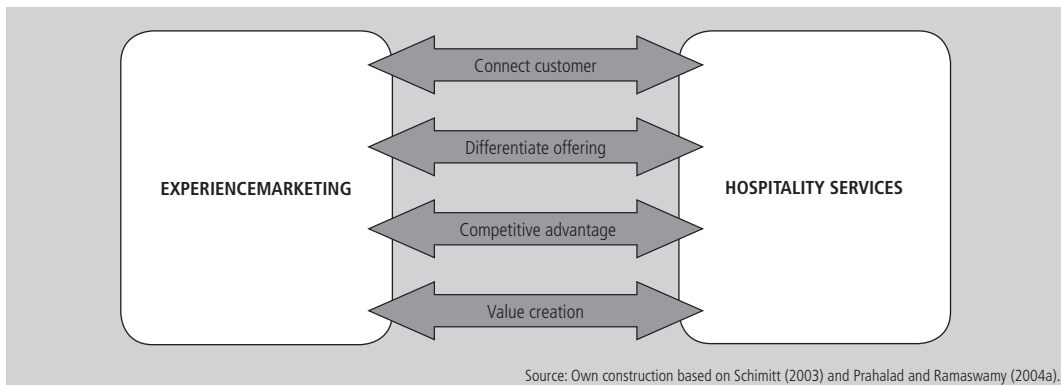


Figure 1 | Interconnection between experimental approach and hospitality tourism.

Therefore, the experience marketing approach is an opportunity for organizations to offer the “something more” and provide an environment to create experiences that involve subjective aspects, as emotions and relations in a way to differentiate and improve hospitality services.

- iii) After understanding customer perspective and interest, next step is to include experience as a strategic point (that should appear in corporate position, brand image and services).
- iv) Experience approach is changing traditional concept of value creation. Value has been created without considering customers inside the process, but now with the experience perspective, value is co-created by firms and customers. In this context, high quality interactions enable tourists to co-create unique experiences with hospitality organizations, being the key to allow new sources of competitive advantage.

## 5. Gentile, Spiller and Noci's model applied to hotels

Several researchers have been interested in proposing models that could help managers to build experiences for customers. One of the best known is the Schmitt's (1999) model. Schmitt (1999) stress

five strategic experience modules: sense (create experiences through hearing, smell, touch and sight); cognitive (appeals to intellect); feel (appeals to feelings); act (refers to physical experiences) and relational (influence of relationships of family and friends).

Later, Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007) develop a model to sustain customer experience. Different from the first model presented by Schmitt, the model by them considers a new perspective, where experiences are co-creation between organizations and customers. Thus, the model is based on the idea of interaction between customers and a product or a company. The interaction implies the customer's involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial physical and spiritual) and “its evaluation depends on the comparison between a customer expectations and the stimuli coming from the interaction with the company and its offering in correspondence of the different moments of contact or touch-points” (Gentile et al., 2007, p. 3).

In this vein, Gentile et al. (2007) develop the strategic experience modules, using six components: sensorial, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle and relational, as shown in table 1. Even believing that the experience is strictly personal, the authors considered that companies can create a propitious environment to develop those experiences for customers.

Drawing from the existent theories on value creation and co-creation the conceptual model

**Table 1** | Components of customer experience.

Components	Description
Sensorial	Affects the senses, addresses to sight, touch, smells and hearing and also relates to esthetical pleasure, excitement, satisfaction, sense of beauty.
Emotional	Involves one's affective system through the generation of moods, feelings, emotions.
Cognitive	Connected with thinking conscious mental processes; an offering may engage customers in using their creativity or in situations of problem solving
Pragmatic	Relates to practical terms, pragmatic component includes, but is not exhausted by, the concept of usability
Lifestyle	Comes from the affirmation of the system of values and the beliefs of the person often through the adoption of a lifestyle and behaviours.
Relational	Involves the person his/her social context and relationship with other people. An offering can leverage this component by encouraging consumption together with other people or lead the creation of a community or still a tribe of fans.

Source: Own construction based on Gentile et al. (2007).

by Gentile et al. (2007), congregate concepts of customer experience and exchanged value are encapsulated in their mutual relations and the inter-relations with the main entities (the company and the consumer). Therefore, intending go further in understanding the experience in tourism context, the current research foments experiential approach to hospitality services based on Gentile's et al.'s (2007) model, but focusing on company side, identifying how hotels create an environment to develop experiences for customers.

## 6. Methodology

The current research focuses on the hotel managers' perspective. In-depth interviews in Brazil and Portugal allowed researchers to explore the views of individual respondents for more precise interpretation. Therefore, using this technique, the hotel managers are able to discuss feelings,

believes (Hair, Babin, Money & Samouel, 2003) and knowledge about how experience is co-created with the customer and lived in the hotel. In depth interviews provide the opportunity for building trust between the interviewer and interviewee, which contributes to improve the quality of the data. Interviewees were selected for their knowledge and experience on creating luxury hotel experience (Cooper & Schindler, 2006) in order to capture features, enhancers and tools (Fehr, 2006) that managers associate with a remarkable experience.

The selection of the hotels started in booking.com. This website has about 250.00 registered hotels in 177 countries and allows search hotels by region and theme. For the purpose of this study, hotels in Brazil and Portugal (see table 2) that has luxury as their main concept (regarding the service, includes resorts, villages and also charm hotels and not only rating by stars) were selected.

After searching through the online platform a list of 270 luxury hotels was developed in Brazil and 289 in Portugal. From this a total of 100 were randomly selected to represent each country. From the initial group of 200 hotels, thirty marketing managers accepted to participate.

The in-depth interviews were conducted through videoconference (during April to July of 2012) with marketing managers of thirty luxury hotels, half in Portugal and half in Brazil. Participants have between 25 and fifty years, from 2–15 years of experience in their position, highly educated and approximately equal from male and female (60% male and 40% female). The interviews began with the explanation of the purpose of the research and the request to record, following by the planned questions. The questions were designed to encourage the flow of information and ensure that they are focused on the topic. The average time for each interview was sixty minutes. All the participants were voluntary without any kind of monetary incentive, and the atmosphere in all interview sessions was informal and relaxed, identity of the respondent and the hotel he or she represents was also preserved. As the final step, the

Table 2 | Sample: Hotels in Brazil and Portugal.

Country	Region	Main cities	Total of hotels	Nº of luxury hotels hotels
Brazil	Southeast	São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro	2.320	144
	Northeast	Salvador, Recife, Fortaleza	1.287	77
	South	Florianópolis, Porto Alegre	643	49
Portugal	Centre	Lisbon	464	107
	South	Albufeira	641	94
	North	Porto	618	88

Source: Own construction.

data was transcribed, preserving the words spoken, and then analysed by a content analysis system, using ATLAS TI software.

The data analysis followed McCracken's (1988, pp. 41-48) process, which moves from an analysis of the particular utterances as individual units up through higher and higher levels of generality. Thereby, the process starts with the reading of transcripts and identification of main tendencies and features resulting from each interview. Then, the second step of the process involved cross-person analysis in order to discover patterns among the interviews.

The interview consists of open ended questions which are designed to gain the participant's view and experience about creating a luxury hotel experience and to clarify and further investigate the concepts identified in the literature review. The interviews are based on six components according to the model by Gentile et al. (2007) (sensorial, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle and relational) that appear along thirteen questions and provide the direction for the interview.

## 7. Findings

To accomplish the purpose of this study, features found are divided in two types: enhancers, that is, how managers explains what is important to develop an environment to customer's experience; and tools, meaning, practical examples that managers relates to enhancers. Figure 2 provides a framework built

based on the findings of this study. Therefore, out of the six experience components analysed, two stand up as most important in creating a luxury experience in luxury hotel: sensorial component and emotional components. The findings reveal that sensorial component comprises engaging customer's senses and arousing aesthetical aspect. Emotional component groups stimulating customer's feelings and changing customer's mood.

According to the model by Gentile et al. (2007), the six components of experience contribute to the whole experience and each component has its own particularities, as we can see in examples of statements of managers in table 3.

However, the findings of this study reveal that from managers' point of view of luxury hotels, the strength of the contribution of sensorial and emotional components is higher than other components. In sum, as enhancers to create an environment to arouse customer's experience in luxury, we may point out five: (i) personalized service; (ii) brand image; (iii) service quality; (iv) contact with the client; and (v) adapted services (Figure 2).

- i) Personalized service: treat customers (guests) as unique; hotels are aware to individual needs and wishes, which should be reflected in hotel's services. Mentioned as the main enhancer of customer experience, a personalized service is a great step to create memorable experiences.
- ii) Brand image: to enhance customer's experiences, manager and staff are concerned to stimulate connection with guests even before their arrival;

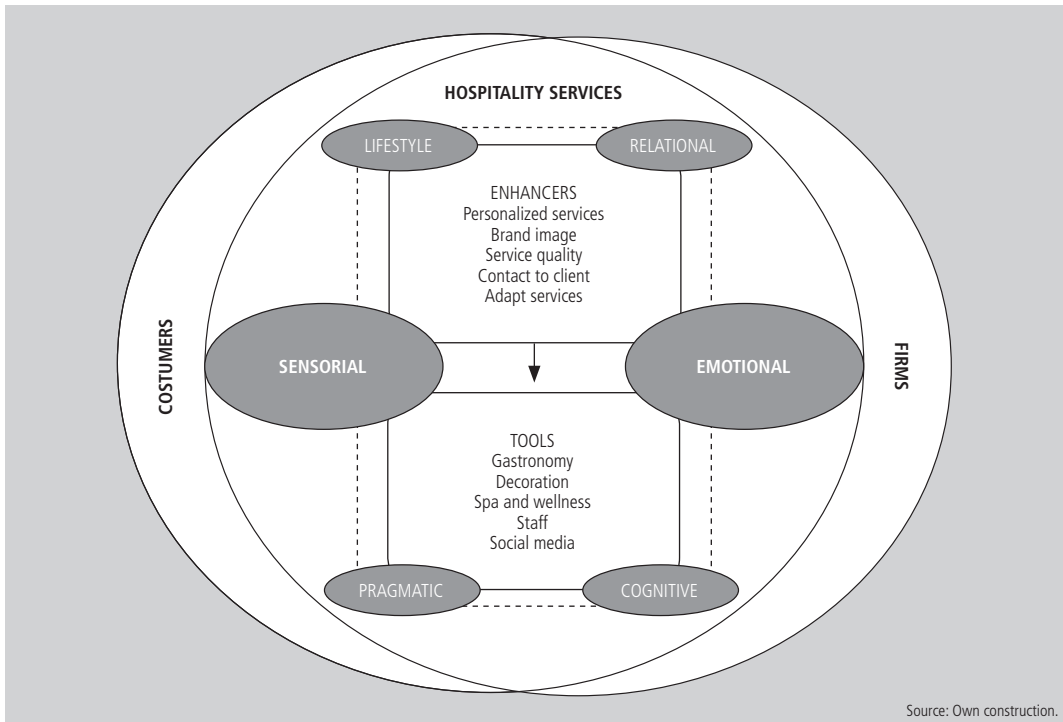


Figure 2 | Framework of experience co-creation environment in hospitality service.

Table 3 | Statements of luxury hotel managers.

Sensorial component
"We manage aroma, flavours, textures, colours and music in a very personalized way to engage guests and create sensory memories of our hotel." (Hotel 9)
"The hotel has its own aesthetical personality, not only in decoration but in all aspects during service offering." (Hotel 4)
Emotional component
"We want to touch and to create memorable histories to our clients. Our emotional link is fundamental, considering that competitive difference is few for hotels." (Hotel 9)
"We are sure that emotional aspect is important. A trip is usually planned considering time and money, so something unexpected could irritate the guest, in this case is important to surprise guests in a positive way." (Hotel 13)
Cognitive component
"We try to solve any problem that could happen, solution should be very fast." (Hotel 1)
"When something is wrong we try to fix always listening to guests and considering their opinion." (Hotel 6)
Pragmatic component
"Our services represent solutions to reach each customer's needs." (Hotel 6)
"Offer an excellent service with a pleasant structure is very important." (Hotel 11)
Lifestyle component
"We try to adapt our services to guest's needs." (Hotel 10)
"One of the ways to align our service with customer's lifestyle is trough advertisement." (Hotel 19)
Relational component
"Some of our services provide integration among clients and others are related to privacy that is sometimes required by the guests." (Hotel 10)
"We offer a personalized and unique service; we try to know our guests before they arrive in hotel." (Hotel 11)

Source: Own construction.



this way brand image is important not only to transmit to customers the hotel identity and distinction, but also to reach hotel target.

- iii) Service quality: in luxury hotels service quality is more than important, it is essential and has to be in the core of set offer. Excellence, perfection and special attention to details are characteristics that have to be presented in hotel set offer.
- iv) Contact with the client: a personal contact with customers could enhance a good environment to develop customer's experience. A close relationship with customers help in getting a quick feedback from them about the hotel experience and allow to listen the customer about their wishes and complaints, which is indispensable to arouse memorable experiences.
- v) Adapted services: to adapt services, it is important to provide customer with the "something more" factor and to surprise him/her. Managers and staff have to understand customers to adapt services focusing in each hotel target, which could be a way for differentiation.

Moreover, when analysed all components, managers mention some points in luxury hotels that are in the top of issues and deserve special attention. These features are tools to create customer's experience: (i) gastronomy; (ii) decoration; (iii) Spa & Wellness; (iv) staff; and (v) social media.

- i) Gastronomy: related to the food and beverage services, gastronomy is the preferred tool that hotels use to engage customers through taste, smells and vision.
- ii) Decoration: an important tool to aesthetical composition of the hotel; decoration is related to design, sophistication and hotel image.
- iii) Spa & Wellness: included Spa & Wellness services, massage, hairdresser and gym; they are mentioned as important tools that hotels managers use to relax and change customer's mood.
- iv) Staff: staff should be aligned with hotel identity and values and should always be ready to attend

customers. A good connection between staff and guests is a big differential; human factor is a point that hotels should invest.

- v) Social media: online social media (like Facebook or other more professionals) are tools that hotels are investing. As a place to interact with customers, social media allow managers to be in touch with customers, before and after the stay; being also a place to know more about the client and to have a quick feedback of the services.

## 8. Conclusions and implications

Despite the fact that the theme is still not so explored academically, the relation between hospitality services and customer experience presuppose market advantages which also highlight the importance of researches in this field of study. First of all, the possibility to connect with the customers allows organizations to be alert to their desires and needs, also differentiating offers, which should provide an environment to increase experience, involving subjective and emotional aspects of the customer. Organizations could still get a competitive advantage when include experience as a strategic factor, associating experience with positioning a brand image. Finally, creating value is also an important aspect where hospitality organizations can create high quality interactions with customers permitting tourists to create unique experiences.

As the main findings, the paper points out features that can lead organizations to put experience in the core of their services: enhancers and tools. As enhancers it was highlighted: personalized service, brand image, service quality, and contact with the client and adapted services. As main tools we find gastronomy, decoration, Spa & Wellness, staff and social media as most cited by hotel managers.

Most of these features were associated in different components representing important issues

to hotel managers. Considering the academic studies and the results of the current research, we can also point out that despite all the importance given to the price component, hotels sensorial and emotional components are more required in the time to create an environment propitious to customers experiences, but also propounding that different costumers have different desires, and treat them as unique is part of a memorable experience.

Despite the rigor of the method applied in this research, we can point out some limitations, which can be suggestions for futures avenues. First, the scarce literature relating firms perspective concerning creation of experience. In fact, most of research focuses only on customer side, but as described, experiences are a process of co-creation between firms and customers.

In addition, little was published in order to relate customer experience and tourism industry, and less specifically, about hospitality. Therefore, this research intends to arouse discussion about customer experience approach for travel industry. This gap in literature also reflects limitations about specific models to sustain customers experience applied to the travel industry. In this manner more research in this field should be conducted in order to develop a model that considers specifications of tourism field and services related.

A larger sample, including other countries and a deeper analysis, in order to consider cultural aspects, could be interesting for future research. Finally, the difficulties to get a positive feedback from managers to be part of the research and schedule the meeting should be reported.

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