Value creation during family visits to heritage visitor attractions

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Abstract: This exploratory study aims to develop an empirically grounded understanding of the value creation process within the context of a family visit to a heritage visitor attraction. Discovering visitor and management understanding of value and the interaction practices visitors undertake at different stages of the service experience will allow the establishment of a typology of value creation (and destruction) practices and will undertake much-needed empirical testing of SDL value-creation theories. Arguing that the context of these interactions must also be considered, this study aims to utilise servicescape theories and will bring together the hitherto divergent SDL and servicescape literature streams.
**Introduction**

This paper will initially consider the context and unit of the study, heritage visitor attractions (HVAs) and families, before examining research on the visitor experience and the role of attractions in facilitating a memorable visit through interactions between visitors and the service provider. Through investigating the visitor experience, this study aims to develop an empirically grounded understanding of the value creation process and contribute to the SDL literature. This paper will consider the potential for tourism of recent developments in marketing and show how this research provides an opportunity to draw together the hitherto divergent SDL and servicescape literature streams.

**Study context – heritage tourism**

Heritage tourism is considered the most popular form of special interest tourism (McKercher and du Cros, 2006). The literature confirms the importance of heritage, being described as one of the major strengths of the UK tourism product, and the desire to visit heritage attractions is a commonly held motivation of visitors to the UK (Caldwell, 2002; Garrod and Fyall, 2000).

However there are real concerns for market saturation with oversupply (Urry, 2002) and the reality for many businesses is that there is insufficient expertise to effectively run HVAs, with skills shortages in several fields such as marketing, interpretation, customer service and site management (Lennon and Graham, 2001). Many HVAs struggle with short-term survival, high rates of staff turnover and budget tightening (Caldwell, 2002; Lennon and Graham, 2001).

The visitor experience is an integral component of the ‘tourism product’ (Pernecky and Jamal, 2010) and tourism’s core product is the beneficial experiences gained by the visitor (Prentice et al, 1998). Travel provides a sense of escape and freedom and a break from the routine, and affects the emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical aspects of the individual (Gilbert and Abdullah, 2004). The experiences should be made as real, compelling and memorable as possible so as to engage each customer in an inherently personal way (Pine and Gilmore, 2004). The visitor experience displays all the characteristics of services: intangibility, inseparability from production and performance to its consumption, lack of heterogeneity and lack of ownership (Prentice et al, 1998; Williams and Soutar, 2009). Practitioners are keenly aware of the need to provide a memorable experience, particularly as much of the competition HVAs face is from the leisure and lifestyle markets for people’s time and money (King, 2002). Whilst the importance of incorporating ‘experiences’ in products is not a new one, what is new is the appreciation that tourist experiences can be better managed and designed and the importance of this to the experience-seeking consumer (Scott et al, 2009).

**Unit of study – family group**

By its very nature, the family group visit will be a social experience, and one of the main aims of such visits is the strengthening of social ties and spending time together as a family (McCabe, 2009). The need for more research with families as the major focus was identified more than two decades ago (Stringer, 1984). Families have been the focus of a
considerable volume of studies in consumer marketing and decision-making, yet a
significant gap exists in tourism (Kang and Hsu, 2005). Understandings of family
decision-making and family democracy assume too much homogeneity and too little
disagreement and there is a need for deeper insights (Bronner and de Hoog, 2008).

Tourism, marketing and SDL constructs of value and interactions

Whilst there is evidence of adoption of initiatives promoting customer centricity by
tourism practitioners (e.g. Shaw et al, 2011), it is less pronounced in the literature.
Tourism marketing literature has been described as lacking in relevance and dated, due
to a neglect of recent key developments and lack of theory building (Li and Petrick,
2008; Lusch and Vargo, 2006). This study aims to address the considerable gap in the
tourism marketing literature, where SDL has received little consideration.

Despite the wide-reaching interest in SDL, there have been growing concerns in the
literature that there has been insufficient critical analysis of some of its central
propositions. The limited critical attention on the definition and actual meaning of key
constructs has hampered the conceptual development and empirical testing of SDL (e.g.
Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos and Ravald, 2009).

Understanding value and its formation are among the key research endeavours of
marketing (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011). The value construct as encapsulated in SDL
theory is only of limited use in the endeavour to better understand the value creation
process behind a memorable experience as a result of a trip to an HVA. Vague
propositions such as ‘the firm and the customer are co-creators of value’ are of little use
as they are, "... too simplistic to allow for theoretical development or practical decision
making in any way" (Grönroos, 2011: 280).

Among the challenges this paper seeks to overcome is that due to the elusive nature of
value and the lack of empirical research, very little is known about the process of value
creation. Questions regarding when the process starts and ends, what is included in the
process, and how different customers perceive value-creating situations in different
ways are all relative unknowns awaiting more substantial consideration. Critically,
“...interaction is indeed a key construct...which in this literature is either totally missing, or
rather seen as a consequence of the logic than as a construct" (Grönroos, 2011: 292).

Merging SDL and servicescape literature

Prior research into specific aspects of service environments has provided extensive
evidence of enhanced performance by the service provider as a result of changes to the
servicescape (Ezeh and Harris, 2007). Yet this research has largely been skewed
towards investigating ambient and design factors, whilst failing to examine social factors
and the more ambiguous human factor. This unsatisfactory trend was identified by
Baker et al (1992), who consider the servicescape as containing not only material
stimuli, but also as a social construct of humans who play a significant role in influencing
behaviour. Indeed, by adopting a constructivist approach in the study of the co-creation
of a tourist experience, it is possible to tie together the servicescape literature with the
hitherto divergent theories on value co-creation within the SDL literature.
Such an approach can also be grounded in Mehrabian and Russell’s PAD (pleasure, arousal and dominance) framework (1974). The under-researched ‘dominance’ dimension is where customers attempt to take control of the service experience; in the context of an HVA visit, visitors interact with the attraction and its ‘interface’ in order to better understand it and to have a more satisfying experience.

**Methodology**

Semi-structured interviews with relevant managers at the selected HVAs can reveal management’s approach to the design of the service environment and attitudes towards value and facilitating visitors’ value creation at their attraction. This would address the crucial issue of congruence, which in an HVA context is the experience as intended by the servicescape designer and the visitor’s evaluation of the actual experience.

These interviews could be complemented by interviews with operational staff that have contact with the public. As the attraction staff are closely involved with interpretation and the methods adopted at each attraction, they are ideally placed to explain their situations, feelings and experiences in their own words. This fits with the interpretivist belief that reality is a social construct given meaning by actors in a social setting (Daengbuppha et al, 2006).

Having a richer understanding of the service environment from the provider’s perspective, a series of interviews with family members before and after their visit will identify their interactions with each other and the service provider and how value was created or destroyed during these. Interviews will be augmented with data supplied by the family members during the visit stage, as they will be provided with recording devices that will provide a record of the visit.

**Bibliography**


