

**A netnography study to uncover the underlying
dimensions of customer experience with resort
brands.**

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ABSTRACT

The interest in customer experience has increased at a phenomenal rate. However, research to capture the true meaning of the concept is limited. This study aims to address the question of what are the underlying dimensions that constitute the construct of customer experience. The netnography method is utilized to validate a priori concepts that have been identified in the literature within the context of resort-hotel brands in a Sharm El Sheikh resort in Egypt. The results identified eight dimensions; comfort, educational, hedonic, novelty, recognition, relational, safety and sense of beauty which are consistent with major studies on experience.

Key words: Customer experience, experiential service brand, netnography.

INTRODUCTION

In today's global marketplace businesses face the challenge of creating an outstanding customer experience to drive brand awareness, secure customer loyalty and ultimately increase profits. Customer experience is defined as the internal and subjective response that customers have of any direct or indirect contact with a company. Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use and service, and is usually initiated by the customer. Whereas, indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representations of a company's products, services, or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports and reviews (Meyer and Schwager, 2007, p. 2).

In a brief history of customer experience, it has been argued that the book of Pine and Gilmore (1999) "Experience economy" is the origin of this nascent phenomenon "customer experience", and the authors claimed that experiences are the new economic offerings (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). As a consequence of the emergence of customer experience concept, limited contributions from scholars focusing on customer experience were made in order to accomplish value for companies (Schmitt, 1999; Forlizzi and Ford, 2000; Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Smith and Wheeler, 2002; Milligan and Smith, 2002; Caru` and Cova, 2003; LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Schmitt, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Shaw and Ivens, 2002; Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle, 2006). This phenomenon is an essential ingredient of the economy in the present time. Therefore, this study addresses the re-emergence of experience and its importance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For decades service managers have strived to develop long term relationships with their customers and provide good service to delight their customers with the ultimate goal of sustaining brand loyalty. Unfortunately, in this new market place good service also is no longer sufficient as an effective differentiator for companies to remain competitive (Schembri, 2006; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Berry et al., 2002; MacMillan and McGrath, 1997). Furthermore, Reicheld (1996) suggests that up to sixty five percent of satisfied customers leave their current service providers and switch to competitors. Because it is less a question of satisfaction with the brand but one of pleasure lived during the immersion (Carù and Cova, 2007) into the service platform (Arvidsson, 2005, 2006). This void leaves managers and researchers alike with insufficient information to answer the question of what truly drive brand loyalty. In an effort to answer this question, it is claimed that customer experience affects loyalty behaviours (Berry et al., 2002; Barsky and Nash, 2002). Academics and practitioners have recognized that merely satisfying customers is not enough, and that going beyond customer satisfaction to “customer delight” is required (Schlossberg, 1990).

Customer delight differs from customer satisfaction in that it relates to extraordinarily high satisfaction coupled with an emotional response such as joy. Customer delight has been defined as a positive emotional state resulting from having one’s expectations exceeded to a surprising degree (Rust and Oliver, 2000). While the value of customer delight continue to increase, today's informed and much sophisticated customers look beyond the mere satisfaction or delight. They seek fulfilment of their desires (Spreng et al., 1996). They seek unique experiences from their buyer-seller interactions (Vandenbosch and Dawar, 2002).

They also look for the unique experiences of co-creating the product with producer-consumer engagement (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). In short, consumers today, seek much more than a product or service, or even a brand or its company to satisfy them, they want an engagement, an experience, and an excitement. Experience suggests the elicitation of higher levels of emotion than those associated with either satisfaction or delight.

Those experiences are more likely to develop into long-term loyal customers. As a consequence, the interest in customer experience has increased at a phenomenal rate (Schembri, 2006; Schmitt, 1999; Forlizzi and Ford, 2000; Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Smith and Wheeler, 2002; Milligan and Smith, 2002; Caru` and Cova, 2003; LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Schmitt, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Shaw and Ivens, 2005; Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle, 2006). However, so far, limited empirical research to capture the true meaning of the concept has been carried out in this area (e.g.; Arnould and Price, 1993; Jones, 1999; Barsky and Nash, 2002; Gentile et al., 2007) and most of the research in this emerging field is mainly conceptual (Berry et al., 2002; MacMillan and McGrath, 1997). Broadly speaking, there is no agreement about what constitutes customer experience. Therefore, it would be impossible to ensure a great customer experience without first determining the salient aspects that are incorporated under this term. Furthermore, customer experience and its link to the bottom line remain largely unexplored in academic research. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the concept of customer experience in the service setting, particularly in the hospitality industry, because of the dramatic upsurge of interest in services from academics and practitioners' alike in today's global economy. Another aim is to investigate the antecedents and consequences of under-researched construct of customer experience with a particular attention paid to brand loyalty.

Although experience economy emerged in the business field, it has crossed its frontier to tourism, which has been identified as one of the pioneer examples of the experience economy (Quan and Wang, 2004) and tourist experience has been an established area of studies during the last three decades (Cohen, 1979, 1988; Dann, 1977; Lee and Crompton, 1992; MacCannell, 1973, 1976; McCabe, 2002; Mitchell, 1983; Neumann, 1992; Ryan, 1997; Wang, 1999, 2002).

A consumer is an individual who, through a process of decision-making, obtain goods and services for personal consumption (Page and Connell, 2006, p.65). Tourist is a consumer “Indeed, from a destination marketer’s or the tourism industry’s perspective, the tourist is a consumer, and the economic and marketing significance of the tourist activity lies in its consumption and spending. Even the experiences of attractions that are in contrast to the daily experience, are itself a part of total consumption of tourism product. Thus, in the marketing/management literature, the tourist experience is all about consumer experiences (e.g., Moutinho, 1987; Swarbrooke & Horner, 1999; Woodside et al., 2000)” (Quan and Wang, 2004, p. 297-298). In tourism, however, the tourist becomes a consumer of place or culture as well as a purchaser of a tourism product. Therefore, the importance of experiencing a place must be recognized (Page and Connell, 2006).

While the current study seek to answer the question of what constitute customer experience. Similarly, the issue of what are the components that constitute the tourist experience remains puzzling (Quan and Wang, 2004). The social science approach is different from the marketing and management approach in discovering the meaning of tourist experience. The former is treating it as consumer experience, but the latter regarding it as peak experience

(Quan and Wang, 2004). Furthermore, both of the approaches capture some of the salient aspects of tourist experience (Quan and Wang, 2004).

In order to better understand the customer/tourist experience in the current study, it is arguably important to understand the main motivations for travel. One of the fundamental questions researchers seek to answer is: why do tourists travel? (Page and Hall, 2002). There is an agreement about the fundamental importance of motivations in the leisure and tourism literature (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981).

Motivation is commonly seen as the driving force behind all actions (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1982; Fodness, 1994). Leiper (2004) defined motivation as ‘a force impelling people to act, attempting to satisfy a need, whereas a need refers to a state of felt deprivation. The study of motivation is deeply rooted in psychological needs and desires (Page and Connell, 2006). Traditionally, push and pull factors are used to describe the travel motivations (Mcintosh and Goeldner, 1990; Otto and Ritchie, 1996), furthermore, most discussions in the tourist motivation literature revolve around the concept of “push” and “pull” factors (Baloglu and Uysal, 1996). The push factors are considered to be socio-psychological motivations that motivate the individual to travel, such as the need for escape, the need for relaxation, the need for novelty, the need for self-esteem and social interaction (Dann, 1981). In contrast the pull factors are those that attract the individual to a specific destination once the decision to travel has been made, such as to scenic beaches, or for shopping and entertainment. The pull factors stem from marketing advertisements, word of mouth, and referral from friends and relatives (Rittichainuwat et al., 2008).

The experiential needs push tourists, whereas experiential benefits of leisure services pull them to the destination. Therefore, emotional and experiential needs are essential in understanding customer experience. Experiential needs and motivations which motivate travellers to travel are various, and may include the need for escape (Bello and Etzel, 1985) which refers to the desire to change pace and to get away from routine, the need for rest and relaxation (Crompton, 1979; Shoemaker, 1989), need for self-esteem (Tian et al., 1996), which refers to needs for recognition, such as talking about the overseas trip to friends who have not been or status and prestige (McIntosh and Goeldner, 1990), excitement (Loker and Perdue, 1992), novelty which refers to the desire to go from a known to an unknown place, or to discover new experience, thrill, and adventure (Snepenger, 1987), romance (Leed, 1991; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995), and need for education, or to indulge in curiosity (Shoemaker, 1989; Tian et al., 1996), family- and friends-oriented (Loker and Perdue, 1992).

In addition to “push” and “pull” concepts, another travel motivation theory, known as TCL (Travel Career Ladder) based in part on Maslow’s (1970) needs hierarchy theory of motivation, was developed by Pearce (1988), Pearce and Caltabiano (1983), and Moscardo and Pearce (1986). TCL explained tourist motivation as consisting of five different levels organized into hierarchy with relaxation needs at the lowest level, followed by safety/security needs, relationship needs, self-esteem and development needs, and finally at the highest level self-actualization/ fulfilment needs. This study provides service marketers with a deeper understanding of the various elements that shape customer experience with their brand.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is more suitable when there is a need for unfolding what surrounds a phenomenon (Carson et al., 2001). Considerable number of studies used qualitative methods to gain insights into the phenomena being investigated (e.g. Arnould and Price, 1993; Clesi et al., 1993; Thompson, 1997). The choice of qualitative research design for this study was influenced by the nature of the research objectives, to understand the dimensions of customer experiences.

Rational for the context

In order to conduct a study that examines the antecedents of customer experience and its consequences with a particular attention paid to brand loyalty, this study therefore employed experiential brand that focus on consumer interaction with a company's product or services (Dea and Hemerling, 1998). Specifically, the service sector was considered a good place to undertake the current study because the close relationship between the customers and the brand exist in the service sector (Franzen, 1999) and usually firms attempting to strengthen those relations with their consumers (Randall, 1997). Luxurious resort-hotel brands in Egypt particularly in Sharm El Sheikh thusly were chosen as a context for this study because of the fact that hotels provide vast array of opportunities for customer interaction that provoke emotions and determine customers' feelings towards the services being offered (MacMillan and MacGrath, 1997). Moreover, hotels provide the right atmosphere for customer engagement at every touchpoint.

Resort-hotels in Egypt particularly in Sharm El Sheikh were considered adequate for this research because Egypt has remained traditionally the hub of tourists for many years and

recently, Egypt has embarked into comprehensive and diversified tourism, whereby tourists can find several kinds of tourism such as: monuments, marinas, recreation, religious purposes and desert safaris that satisfies different ambitions of tourists and which are widely needed nowadays such as therapeutic, conferences, exhibitions, environment and sports. But, how are those hotel brands currently living up to the challenge of creating great customer experience? This study is seeking to answer this question.

Netnography

Experience is something singular that happens to an individual and researchers can not directly access (Caru and Cova, 2008). Therefore researchers only interpret what their subjects have expressed orally, in writing or through their behaviour. Experience becomes more and more important to marketing, however, the methodologies typically used to research experiences, such as interviews and focus groups, have a number of drawbacks such as respondent inhibition (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Verbatims instead are argued to be important to understanding the private nature of the experience to be studied (Caru and Cova, 2008). In the meantime, the ethnography of consumption has, in just a few years, become a major qualitative research strategy, given the limitations of questionnaire-driven verbatims and other kinds of interviews (Mariampolski, 1999, 2005) when it came to understand the deep feelings and emotions lived by consumers (Caru and Cova, 2008). Ethnography has been used to cover such experiences since the shift from a researcher-devised retrospective narrative in an interview form to an introspective narrative that is produced, fine-tuned and diffused by the consumer in the shape of a text diary, audio diary or video diary (Caru and Cova, 2008). This decentred practice, which turns consumers into active producers of their experiences' narratives, is rooted in the rise of so-called "self-reflexive" individuals (Caru and Cova, 2008). Individuals' reflexivity is what enables them to tell their stories and to

explain their actions using words. This is extremely useful in helping researchers to understand the hedonic and subjective dimension of the consumption experience, rather than the functional and objective dimension of a product/service's utilisation (Caru and Cova, 2008).

In the late 1990s, marketing researchers began adapting and expanding market oriented ethnographic methods to online formats, specifically through what Kozinets (2002) termed "netnography" which are broadly based on the reflexive narratives that people publish online. Kozinets (1997, 1998, 2001, and 2002) is one of the leading researchers, who used netnography in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour, he has defined netnography in terms of both product and process. As a product, a netnography is "a written account of on-line cyberculture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology" (Kozinets, 1997, p. 470). As a process or research methodology, netnography is a "new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62).

Netnography has been used as a marketing research technique, in which publicly available information is used to "identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic research methods are able to develop "a 'thick description' of the lived experience of consumers" Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003, p. 215). Netnographic studies seem to be able to offer those "thick descriptions" of the life worlds of consumers.

It is argued that netnography is the most adequate method to examine customer experience because customers usually write their reviews after their stay ends, so their experience is not affected by observation (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography is 'far less time consuming and elaborate' (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62) compared to traditional (face-to-face) ethnographic research that is incredibly time consuming, typically consisting of months of field work and in-depth observations and interviews (Wolcott, 1994). In addition, traditional ethnographic research requires a considerable amount of time to become immersed in the field, and always carries with it a potential 'researcher effect' whereby the presence of the researcher affects or interrupts the natural, normal practices of everyday life (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Netnography, on the other hand, can be conducted entirely unobtrusively, if desired (Kozinets, 2002). Like traditional ethnography, netnography is naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) that captures individuals and groups in their natural settings, conducting their everyday life practices. Unlike unnatural, market-produced situations such as interviews and focus groups, netnography captures consumers in their own, natural environments, providing researchers 'with a window into naturally occurring behaviour' (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62), as consumers chat with one another, discuss information and search for information on line.

In general, traditional ethnographic methods include; (1) gaining 'entrée' into the culture or group one wants to investigate; (2) gathering and analysing data; (3) ensuring trustworthiness of data interpretation; (4) conducting ethical research; and (5) member checking, or getting feedback from participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Kozinets, 2002). Kozinets (2002) provides guidelines for adapting these guidelines to the online context, these guidelines are discussed below:

Entrée

Entrée involves identifying the online communities most relevant to a researcher's particular research interest as well as learning as much as possible about the communities that are identified. These online communities could be: electronic bulletin boards; independent web pages; listservs; multiuser dungeons; and chat rooms, each of which provides different kinds of information to researchers (Kozinets, 2002). Certain criteria that groups are preferred that have "(1) a more focused and research question, relevant segment, topic, or group; (2) higher "traffic" of postings; (3) larger numbers of discrete message posters; (4) more detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) more between-member interactions of the type required by the research questions" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 63).

A netnography in the form of non-participant observation is used in this particular study based on customer reviews published on the internet that contained detailed information about their experiences in Sharm El Sheikh Hotels. The reason for choosing the non-participant observation is the undesirable influence of the outsider to the group (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). The researcher intensively reviewed the most prominent websites that offer online consumer reviews about their experiences either positive or negative with hotels in Sharm El Sheikh taking into consideration the criteria recommended by Kozinets (2002). The search for the convenient websites for this study was conducted on Google using combinations of the following keywords: "Sharm el sheikh", "Hotels", "Customer experience". As a result, four websites were found to be more relevant to this study; www.holidaywatchdog.com, www.tripadvisor.com.

Data collection

The second step of Kozinets's framework involves data collection. Kozinets (2002) stated that there are two types of data collected when conducting a netnography; First, the written communications occurring between and among participants in the online setting (which, for analysis, are typically copied and pasted into word processor documents on the researcher's computer) or downloaded. Second, the researcher's self-authored fieldnotes, in which he or she describes, reflects upon, and analyses what he or she is observing during the research process. In this study, direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members will be adopted. Some aspects were considered when choosing the customer messages for example: Firstly, the text which is experiential in nature and contains fully description of the experience are selected; Secondly, overwhelming amounts of data are anticipated, therefore, all messages are examined and disqualified reviews and any irrelevant messages will be discarded; Thirdly, an attempt will be made to find diverse (both positive and negative) journal postings of their experiences with the intention of sampling strategy not to offer representativeness or transferability, but to focus on analytic depth of the topic (See Brown et al., 2003).

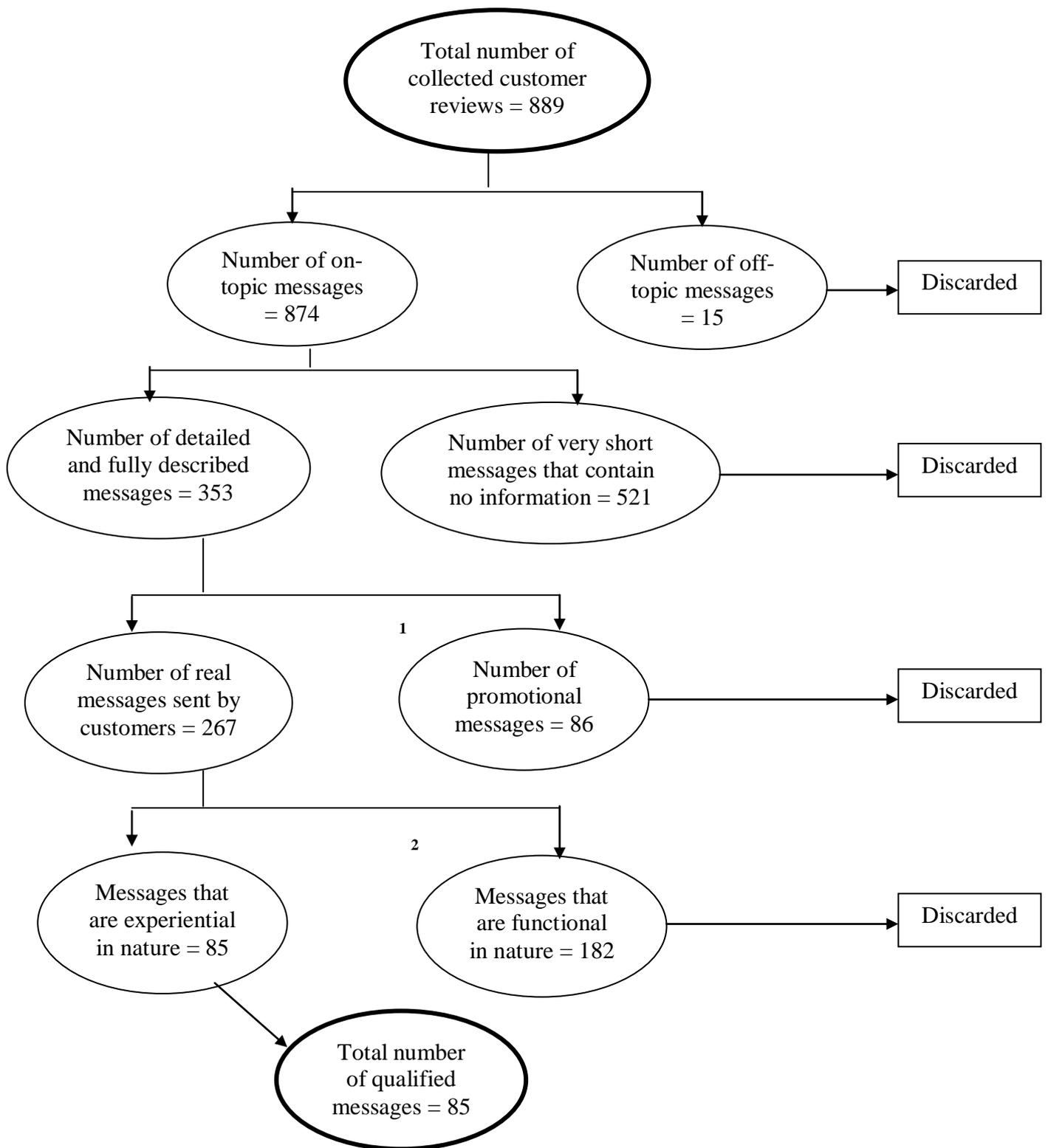
The selection process resulted in eighty five reviews (See Table 1 and figure 1). The collected messages were posted between August 2007 and August 2008. Although international in scope, postings on these websites primarily occurred in English. Researcher accessed those customer reviews websites from the first of September 2008, to the mid of December 2008 to secure a sufficient volume of reviews about a predetermined sample of resort-hotel brands in Sharm El Sheikh.

Kozinets (2002) stated that “the uniquely mutable, dynamic, and multiple online landscape mediates social representation and renders problematic the issue of informant identity” (p. 64). In online contexts, participants might be more likely to present an identity that is significantly different than their ‘real’ identities, which could possibly undermine the trustworthiness of the data collected. In addition, in online communities, demographic characteristics of participants cannot be collected or verified. To address some of these issues, Kozinets (2002) urges researchers to make the unit of analysis the speech act or communication, and not the individual. He also argues that blatant misrepresentation is frowned upon by most online communities, where ‘codes of etiquette’ discourage this sort of behaviour through ‘flaming, ostracism, and banishment’ (Kozinets, 2002, p. 65). To ensure the most trustworthy data possible, Kozinets (2002) urges researchers to immerse themselves in the culture of the community through long-term engagement.

Table1: The number of the examined customer reviews

Resort name	Number of customer reviews
www.tripadvisor.com	
Four Season	74
Hyatt Regency	141
Grand Rotana Resort and Spa	60
www.holidaywatchdog.com	
Renaissance Golden View	14
Sunrise Island View Hotel	14
Hyatt Regency	6
Concorde El Salam Hotel	34
Conrade Sharm El Sheikh Resort	24
Jaz Mirabel Beach Resort	29
Baron Resort Hotel	13
Sultan Gardens Resort Hotel	13
Hilton Sharm Dream Resort Hotel	7
Maritime Jolie Ville Resort & Casino	6
Melia Sinai Hotel	10
Hilton Sharm Waterfalls Resort	3
Iberotel Grand Sharm Hotel	5
Laguna Vista Hotel	26
Sunrise Island Garden Suites	18
Marriot Mountain & Beach Resort	3
Neama Bay Hotel	1
Savoy Hotel	10
Coral Beach Tiran	3
Grand Rotana Resort	2
LTI	47
Oriental Resort	29
Reef Oasis Beach	22
Baron Palms Resort	5
Sheraton Sharm Hotel Resort	8
Domina Coral Bay Harem	4
Hauza Beach Resort	38
Three corners Kirosez	38
Creative Mexicana Resort Hotel	8
Sonesta Beach Resort	13
Domina Coral Bay	4
Sol Y Mar Mirabel Beach Resort	2
Pyramisa Sharm Resort	18
Millennium Oyouun Hotel & Resort	5
Rehana Sharm Resort	55
Tropitel Neama Bay Hotel	10
Royal Rojana Hotel	4
Domina Coral Bay Resort	4
Royal Plaza Hotel	22
Calimera Royal Diamond Beach	2
Grand Plaza	25
Raouf Sun Hotel	3
Noria Resort Hotel	1
Royal Paradise	5
Cameldive Club and Hotel	1
Total	889

Figure 1: Customers' reviews selection process



¹ Promotional messages are believed to be sent by the company to promote the hotel among the online community members

² The functional messages are those primarily concerned with the evaluations of different services provided by the resort without mentioning any kind of emotions provoked or telling any stories about the experience.

Analysis and interpretation

Once messages that are directly related to the investigator's research questions are identified, a data analysis approach similar to grounded theory or the constant comparative method (Glaser and Straus, 1967; Straus and Corbin, 1990) are conducted, with the help of a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software such as Nvivo (Kozinets, 2002). This study analyzed the informants' experiences from the journal entries through following the principles for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data as recommended by (Spiggle, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Relevant themes to research hypotheses have been identified and then the emergent themes were compared with preconceptions derived from the literature.

First, the data was coded into discrete parts (open coding), closely examined and compared for similarities and differences, with each code representing a particular aspect of the phenomenon under study. Then patterns were established across the multiple sources of data to contextualise and integrate the coding categories. The selective coding was used to specify relationships between the constructs and move to a higher level of abstraction, that is what Arnould and Wallendorf (1994, p. 495) describe as the "empirical grounding for an etic understanding". By interpreting those reviews, the researcher was able to find out the dimensions of the customer experience, its major causes and its outcomes.

Research ethics

As in any form of research, netnographers must address the issue of ethics, Kozinets (2002) described two major ethical issues surrounding online research, including netnography: "Are online forums to be considered a private or a public site?"; and 'What constitutes "informed consent" in cyberspace?' (p. 65). Kozinets (2002) noted that no clear consensus on the public

or private nature of message boards had yet emerged and that the requirement for consent was not clear. For confidentiality and privacy purposes, Kozinets (2002) urging researchers to“(1) fully disclose his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members during any research; (2) ensure confidentiality and anonymity of informants; and (3) seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched; (4) to take a cautious position on the private-versus-public medium issue. This procedure requires the researcher to contact community members and to obtain their permission (inform consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 65; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998). However, Haggerty (2004) stated that these ethical issues remain unresolved among qualitative researchers conducting research online, explaining that some researchers view online data as “public pronouncements, comparable to letters to the editor, and as such amenable to academic analysis without the necessity of ethical review” (p. 405). Therefore, ethical guidelines for the study of online communication recommended by Kozinets should be revised. These guidelines make sense in restricted (semi-) private online communication and when taking departure in traditional ethnography.

Langer and Beckman (2005) develop an argument for conducting covert netnographic studies – which participants were not informed of the researchers’ presence or seeking consent - for sensitive topic of cosmetic surgery, by arguing that revealing themselves as researchers would have potentially endangered the research project if participants had opposed the research. They also argue that the message boards are open to researchers because they are ‘public communication media’ (Langer and Beckman, 2005, p. 197). The researcher is not claiming that his topic is a sensitive one, but drawing on the successful outcome of the Langer and Beckman study (2005), and the increasing ‘normalisation’ of e-communication since Kozinets developed the methodology, the researcher asserted that website utilized in the

current study are established as public forums of communication and that consent has become unnecessary for analysis of public postings. It stands to a reason that asynchronous chat on the internet often using a pseudonym, where people can post relatively anonymous messages. Only, registered users have the option to present information about themselves, such as gender, age, occupation and geographical location and this information may or may not be accurate.

Member checks

Finally, in traditional qualitative research, ‘member checking’ is the process of presenting research findings back to research participants, in order to solicit their comments on the researchers’ interpretations of data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Kozinets (2002) argued that member checks are particularly useful in netnographic research because they allow researchers to gain new knowledge that can deepen understandings otherwise based solely on observational online data. Because member checks are typically conducted after data collection and analysis has ended, member checks also help researchers address some of the ethical issues encountered in netnographic methods, “while still preserving the value of unobtrusive observation” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 66). In addition, it allows researchers to develop ongoing relationships with online communities. However, some researchers, such as Langer and Beckman (2005) argued against the necessity of presenting research findings back to participants, especially when the netnography was conducted completely unobtrusively. Having conducted the current study entirely unobtrusively, then analysis and interpretation of the results means the end of the qualitative study.

An important aspect in conducting the current qualitative study is that the researcher does begin with a grand theory in mind to test the data. Coding in the early stage of data analysis was guided by prior themes that have been identified on the basis of the literature. Coding of the narratives utilised both the start list of codes based on the constructs identified in the literature and similarly open codes process. Initially, a start list of codes was created based on the range of constructs generated from the literature review. Miles and Huberman (1994) indicated that the start list of codes could be based on a “conceptual framework, list of research questions, hypotheses, problem areas, and/or key variables that the researcher brings to the study” (p. 58).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the essential task of categorizing is to bring together into temporary categories those data bits that apparently relate to the same content. It is then important to "devise rules that describe category properties and that can, ultimately, be used to justify the inclusion of each data bit that remains assigned to the category as well as to provide a basis for later tests of replicability" (p. 347). The data coding process proceeded through a number of steps as explained by Esterberg (2002) and Huberman and Miles (1994). The texts were individually reviewed and coded to either the starting list or new open codes were formed in the process. Also memos were documented to note particular insights and ideas regarding the data analysis.

The coding process involved three phases: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The open coding phase (Miles and Huberman, 1984; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) focus on linking the qualitative data to the research issues identified from the literature. Therefore, the open coding process reviewed the texts line by line and made note of issues that related to the start list of codes and created new codes as the understanding of the data proceeded. The

focus of open coding approach is to find patterns in the texts, which are relevant to the literature. Initial open coding also focused on identifying codes that already known before coding process because they were informed by the literature. During the second step, which is known as axial coding phase, the texts were analyzed to compare and contrast between themes which enable identification of patterns within the texts. Selective coding at the end “involves moving to a higher level of abstraction with the developed paradigmatic constructs, specifying relationships, and delineating a core category or construct around which the other categories and constructs revolve and that relates them to one another” (Spiggle, S., 1994, p. 495)

Initially, texts were analysed using QSR Nvivo Version 8.0 qualitative analysis software. All the texts have been stored electronically for further clarification if necessary. Nvivo 8.0 was used to review the text, code the data by assigning text to free nodes, build tree nodes that connect the free nodes into themes, reviewing the tree nodes (themes) for consistency, and proceeding through the qualitative data analysis. Gibbs (2002) indicated that the use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, such as Nvivo, makes data analysis easier, more reliable, more accurate and more transparent. Esterberg (2002) credited the qualitative software as useful because of its capacities for data storage and retrieval. The use of Nvivo for this study made the manipulation and analysis of the data easier.

Content analysis or analyzing the content of the reviews is the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data (Patton, 1990). "The qualitative analyst's effort at uncovering patterns, themes, and categories is a creative process that requires making carefully considered judgments about what is really significant and meaningful in the data" (Patton, 1990, p. 406). The categories labelled with particular reference to concepts

from customer experience literature based on a prior research driven code development approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This allowed for consistency of terminology and consistency with the prior work. To determine the reliability of the coding through content analysis, stability was ascertained when the content was coded more than once by the researcher (Weber, 1985).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of the findings from the netnographic study related to the customer experience dimensions are discussed in the following section:

The content analysis has identified eight dimensions of customer experience applicable to customers visiting Sharm El Sheikh five-star hotels. Compared to dimensions identified by major studies on experience (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Arnould and Price, 1993; Otto and Ritchie, 1996; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Poulsson and Kale, 2004; O'Loughlin et al., 2004; Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Gentile et al., 2007). This study uncovered those dimensions; comfort, educational, hedonic, novelty, recognition, relational, safety and sense of beauty which are highly relevant to customer experiencing Sharm el sheikh hotels and consistent with the findings of Otto and Ritchie (1995).

A priori dimensions supported

There are numerous dimensions of experience that characterize the feelings of customers in hotels. However, the scope of this inquiry is limited to only those dimensions referred by online customers who visited Sharm el sheikh hotels and sent their reviews to the website. This study gave support to the a priori dimensions generated from prior research findings.

Comfort

The comfort aspect of customer experience in their holiday was generally agreed and particularly stressed by older customers. Findings from the qualitative study indicated that the need for repose is an important element that is wedded to the customer decision when choosing a place to spend his holiday in. Additionally, the textual analysis of the customer reviews revealed a focus on comfort and relaxation they experienced during their stay: “The day to leave came and we were sad what a fantastic holiday we have never felt so comfortable or welcome anywhere” and also “We stayed in the Royal Savoy on an all inclusive basis for two weeks in early December. We enjoyed one of the most relaxing and enjoyable holidays to date”.

The findings are consistent with (Crompton, 1979; Shoemaker, 1989; Otto and Ritchie, 1995). Customers referred to the basic amenities hotels provide to ensure their comfort and relaxation, which may include rooms and the surrounding environment. A further elaboration on comfort was expressed in different messages; customers indicated that they feeling relaxed throughout their experience, such as “We had a twin double bed garden room, which was pretty good as rooms go. Everything we needed for a relaxing short break was there” and also “The waterfalls pool was very relaxing as it wasn’t too busy and had also relaxing music in the background”. Customers were motivated to go to the health spa for the release from physical and mental tension

“We went to the health spa for the Cleopatra package which was £35.00 and included a full body massage, a facial and face mask with cucumber, a body scrub, body wrap,

sauna steam room and Jacuzzi which is amazing value and was very relaxing, I would definitely recommend”

[Miss S Cottee, Sunrise Island View hotel review, posted October 2007,

www.holidaywatchdog.com]

Educational

A major theme emerging among customers is the educational dimension. Educational experience or “Learning for fun” as termed by (Packer, 2006) encompasses a mixture of discovery, exploration, mental stimulation and excitement (Packer, 2006). It is also characterized by the learning is voluntary when learners themselves have a real choice regarding what, where, when, how, and with whom they learn and stimulated by the needs and interests of the learner (Packer, 2006). Online community’s members made references about many educational experiences they had. For instance, the PADI open water diver course, (PADI) the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) is the world's largest recreational diving membership and diver training organization founded in 1966 by John Cronin and Ralph Erickson. PADI members, including dive centers, resorts, educational facilities, instructors, and divemasters, teach the majority of the world's recreational divers. As one member recounted:

“I have just returned from Sharm El-Sheikh, where I completed my open water PADI together with my 2 sons, aged 10 and 12y. We had 2 fantastic days. We had a really good instructor, very professional, funny and great with kids. We all thought he was excellent, and we all passed! The aquatic life we saw was amazing too!”

[A female customer, Cameldive Club and Hotel review, posted September 2008,

www.tripadvisor.com]

Some resorts deliberately cater to their customers' entertainment motives, while attempting to maintain the education element as a secondary one. However, today's customers take for granted the educational experience. In a recent study conducted by Pennington–Gray and Kerstetter (2001) on the benefits sought by university educated women who travel for pleasure. Descriptive statistics of the 27 benefit statements revealed that “to experience natural surroundings” (mean = 3.58) had the highest mean score, followed by “to seek an educational experience” (mean = 3.41). A visit to Sharm el sheikh was thought to be enjoyable for all types of customers and highly educational especially for the children at the school age, this is what was mentioned by a customer:

“The pier takes you right to the best snorkelling/diving experience in the world! There is no need to achieve that via a water craft just jump right in and put your face in the warm clear water where colourful and amazing sea life greets you. I enrolled my 8 year old daughter in a free snorkelling class and in one hour, she was doing her own snorkelling”

[Ms Mj Pope, Jaz Mirabel Beach Resort hotel review, posted June 2007,
www.holidaywatchdog.com]

As the findings indicated, there is strong evidence that educational experience customers seek is provided through the hospitality establishments. However, those establishments should be cautious in providing solely educational experiences and neglect of entertainment, whereby the primary motivation of customer visiting the place is to have fun not to learn something. However, they want to engage in an experience of learning because they value and enjoy the

process of learning itself, rather than learning outcomes or knowledge gained (Packer, 2006). This educational element of experience is consistent with Pine and Gilmore (1999) point of view and Otto and Ritchie (1995) dimensions of service experience. The findings showed that the customer experiencing “free-choice learning” as suggested by Packer (2006) of diving, snorkelling, quad biking, star gazing ...etc. This experience is autotelic means “having itself as its only purpose” Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and is characterized by a mixture of discovery, exploration, mental stimulation and excitement (Packer, 2006).

Hedonic

Findings illustrated that hedonic is central to customer experience in the hospitality and tourism context. Hedonic dimension incorporates excitement, enjoyment and memorability (Otto and Ritchie, 1995). Customer reviews emphasized the importance of this dimension of experience. Hedonic aspects of the consumption experiences ties into the intangibility of the services provided in the hotel context such as adventure vacation, a memorable meal or the surrounding of a plush hotel (Titz, 2008). Firstly, feeling of excitement is an important aspect that many members frequently referenced in their discussion; the most exciting parts of their experience were Bedouin experience and snorkeling. Moments of excitement occurred was described by customers in the following two stories:

“The Bedouin experience is another excursion we went on, it was great, we rode on camels and watched the sunset also did some stargazing - you look through a telescope and get to see the moon and Jupiter, and another flashing star, ‘can’t remember the name of it’”

[Miss K Coombs, Conrad Sharm El Sheikh Resort Reviews, posted September 2007,

www.holidaywatchdog.com]

“I did eventually try snorkelling for the first time and it is an experience every one should try. My only regret is that I have seen the film JAWS, so you can imagine how my mind was running riot about getting into the water. I felt so nervous; I had only ever paddled in the sea before. I also have the added problem of having partial hearing in both ears, so I knew I would not hear jaws coming...

Don't laugh - I am being serious, but I was really lucky as a knight in a shiny wet suit came to my RESCUE. He was a staff member of the snorkelling/diving team. He helped me overcome my fear by coming into the water with me. Once he had calmed me down and got me to control my breathing the film music in my head then turned from JAWS to 'THE SNOW MAN' you know the bit where he is holding the boy's hand flying across the roof tops } this was me except I was flying above the sea bed. To glide across the surface of the water holding his hand and feeling very safe and seeing the rainbow of coloured tropical fish and the coral was awesome. When you sit on the beach you do not realise what beauty lies beneath the waves. This experience was one I will never forget and I would like to take this opportunity to thank this young man {who's name I did not get} for making it happen and I am looking forward to trying it again in September”

[A ³female customer, Sultan Garden Resort Reviews, posted August 2008,

www.tripadvisor.com]

³ Some customers did not mention their names, and researcher recognized their gender from the context

Secondly, the findings also showed that amusement was delivered to the consumers in two ways: passive entertainment, whereby customers are required to arrange for its delivery and customers simply seeing it enjoyable. Category of passive entertainment includes an enormous variety of activities such as watching the Italian show as recounted:

“Within the complex is an open air theatre, where the Italian entertainment squad put on a show every night, which can be anything from slapstick comedy or classical dance, to musicals like Dracula or Pinocchio!!! It’s all in Italian of course, but very enjoyable nonetheless”

[Mr D Smyth, Reef Oasis Blue Bay Hotel review, posted August 2007,
www.holidaywatchdog.com]

In contrast to passive entertainment is active entertainment, whereby customers participate in the activity to ensure their own amusement. But, sometimes participation in active entertainment requires a certain level of skill, knowledge to ensure entertainment. This is what explained by optimal condition theory, whereby flow experience occurs when there is a match between the perceived challenge and the skill level needed to handle the given challenge. If the challenge is too difficult and is above the individual’s skill level, anxiety will set in. If the challenge is too easy, boredom will take over, eventually leading to depression (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Active entertainment includes simple activities such as “Aqua gym, darts, yoga, belly dancing quizzes etc”

Entertainment activities are performed under the umbrella of ‘animation’ department that is in charge of co-ordination of sports and cultural entertainment for children and adults, and are managed by recreation experts, called ‘animateurs’. Costa et al. (2004) stated that “The word

animation derives from the Latin *animus*, which means soul, feelings, spirit, whereas *animate* as a verb stands for activating, enhancing life, giving breath, recreating and, in other terms causing a good mood, offering suggestion and possibilities for an active life style (Jacovlev 1992)". Online community members made many references to particular events whereby they have been involved in through the animation team members who motivate them. For example, the entertainment staff or the animation team was a noted feature of those narratives. As one member recounted:

“The animation team were the best Ronny, Jessica, Sam, Oscar Rhamy, Ali they made our stay really enjoyable and as so friendly and look after you all really well. They always kept us entertained and the night entertainment was so funny and they were always getting people to join in with all the activities and the club dance at the end of the night.”

[Miss S Smith, Conrad Sharm El Sheikh Resort Review, posted August 2007,
www.holidaywatchdog.com]

Thirdly, experience gained has some degree of memorability (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) as mentioned by customers. Within certain narratives, customers expressed that they may occasionally try something that unexpectedly achieves joyful and memorable experience. As members post their messages, they made numerous references to the memorability of the experience they had, as indicated by the following examples: “This hotel resort was a slice of heaven. I have no doubt that our stay has created wonderful memories that will forever be etched into our minds and hearts”, and “Riding through the very silent desert on a camel for a late night, camp fire dinner under millions of stars was an experience we will never forget”. Furthermore, in some of the observations of the texts some interesting reflections on the

memorability were revealed; “The same goes for the climb to the top of mount Sinai through the middle of the night to watch the sunrise at the top, absolutely exhausting but totally amazing. Egypt is unforgettable and we loved every minute”. On the basis of the results of the current study, hotel brand must convey the memorability of the experience to the potential customers and then it must deliver the memorable experiences it promises.

Those experiences evoke different types of emotions. The affective emotional states elicited during the experiences can and will enable marketers and managers to better understand, design, and provide the experience that customers seek. Interestingly, a comment was made by one of the members on the emotions evoked: “It is difficult to express my emotions because the holiday was really, really nice, thanks to your hotel and special thanks to the hotel staff”, this is what Davis et al. (1991), based on the work of Maslow and others, described as the peak experiences: “..... a feeling of deeper knowing or profound understanding, a deep feeling of love (for yourself , another, or all people), greater awareness of beauty or appreciation, a sense that it would be difficult or impossible to describe adequately in words”(p. 88).

Novelty

Comments about the uniqueness and individuality of natural setting or the different excursions provided were seen as an indication of the novelty dimension. Novelty as an experiential need sought by customers was found in the customers posts. This finding is consistent with previous studies that investigated novelty subject Crompton (1979) and Dann (1981) and identified novelty as one of pull factors plays an important role in the decision making processes that tourists utilize in their choice of destination. Conceptually, the term novelty implies newness or uniqueness. Need for novelty refers to the desire to go from a

known to an unknown place, or to discover new experience, thrill, and adventure (Lee and Crompton, 1992). Lee and Crompton (1992) study that identified four dimensions of novelty paradigm, change from routine, thrill, boredom-alleviation, and surprise. Findings from the qualitative study were more consistent with the notions of change from routine, thrill, and surprise. Some reflections made by customer on the perception of the newness and uniqueness of the experience. For example, those two comments on the glass bottom boat trip: “This was the highlight of my holiday as we saw all the coral reefs, the fish were like nothing I have ever seen before....we even saw a few clown fish ‘Nemo fish’” and “A boat trip with snorkelling it is literally like being in an aquarium and the fish are not scared of you they come right up to investigate ‘once in a life time!!!’”.

Another example:

“I had never been snorkelling before but once I had I wanted to go again and again. It was amazing; the fish actually swim right round you. The thing that put us off about it though was a stingray and 3 hammerhead sharks!!!!!!!!!!!! (Not at the same time though). We saw the Stingray when snorkelling but it was right at the bottom of the sea and it wasn't interested in us...

We saw the 3 sharks when we were eating tea at the Grillhouse. It was weird to see, but hotel staff says that they are always about but only at night”

[Miss L Mottershead, Dreams Beach Hotel review, posted June 2008,
www.holidaywatchdog.com]

As shown in the previous examples, that customers were provided a form of change that enable them to experience something different, this finding is consistent. Findings from the

netnographic study also showed that customer experiences are characterized by thrill or adventure for novelty-seeking customers, as recounted by one customer:

“DO make sure you try the quad biking in the desert excursion. It is an amazing journey. I tried it, but found it difficult for my small arms to steer, so I jumped on the back of my companion's quad. I am glad I did, as the experience was even better shared, and being able to chat about it as we saw more and more of the desert open up before us. I wasn't that bothered about not driving one myself, even though I did try. Go in the evening, as it is a more varied and amazing experience. We set off about 5:30pm. If you go in the evening, you see the sunset in the desert on your way. We stopped at a Bedouin camp where the kids are very playful and curious. Don't buy any goods from them as it is expensive. You then drive out to the echo valley where you stop and shout your name at the valley and hear it echo back at you. It is amazing. You drive back in the dusk with your headlights on. You always drive in a line behind the guide, so you are always safe and accounted for. Be careful for random abandoned tyres in the desert sand when you drive back at night.

[Miss N Wooding, Crowne Plaza Resort Hotel Review, posted May 2008,

www.holidaywatchdog.com]

Finally, Surprise or unexpectedness as suggested by prior work is one of the dimensions of the novelty paradigm (Berlyne, 1960). Customer expressed surprise in their posts which stems from a discrepancy between what they expect and what is actually experienced, A striking example explained the surprise element of novelty: “Our room cleaner was extremely helpful and every day when we came back to our room he had made something extraordinary with the towels. One day he made a heart, the next a flower, then a snake and the best one of

all was a swan, it was amazing, I used to take a photo each day, it was a lovely surprise coming back to our room each day to see what he had made”

Recognition

Recognition refers to the feeling of importance (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). From customer comments, it is obvious that staff exhibiting certain types of behaviour which made them feel important, such as: “Everything is "with pleasure madam", “The staff treat you like royalty and insist on not let you lift a finger even when I tried!”, “My daughter was treated like a princess”. It was also noted that customers feel right at home with the staff, because staff are happy to see them, always have a smile on their faces, warmly greeting guests, and calling them by their name. That was illustrated in the following comments: “Reception has been altered slightly but the welcome from the check in staff, the security guards, the pool bar staff & pool attendants were the same as ever & they all seemed genuinely pleased to see us again”. This finding supports conclusion drawn by previous study of Otto and Ritchie (1996) where recognition was identified as an important factor of service experience, customers wanted to feel a sense of personal recognition from their service encounters, such that they could feel important and confident that they were being taken seriously.

Safety

Sharm el sheikh as destination was perceived as a relatively safe region. This particularly apparent in those reviews where customers referred to the safety and security perception. In the tourism literature, there is an emergent consensus that there is an association between crime and tourism and the crime rates are higher in tourist areas (Fujii and Mak, 1980; Walmsley et al., 1983; Pizam, 1982; Pizam and Mansfeld, 1996). Therefore, the safety of tourists is an increasing concern in holiday decision making because if tourists feel unsafe or

threatened at a destination, they are not likely to enjoy the experience or even take part in any activities.

Egypt as an international destination has witnessed fewer terrorist incidents in the first half of the 1990's, terrorist groups tried to destabilizing the economy or gaining much needed media attention to achieve ideological objectives (Hall and O'Sullivan, 1996). As a consequence, Egypt has gained a reputation for being an unsafe place for a holiday for certain period of time, however, this reputation has been changed, and that was obvious in the following comments: "Two women travelling alone, and we were very safe, very welcome and we had the most superb time", "If this is the first time to Egypt like it was for us all I can say is you are very safe the people have wicked sense of humours and love the brits!!". The results also revealed that hotel security staff and certain security devices such as metal detectors provide customers with a greater sense of the safety.

According to Prideaux (1996) resorts that offering a 'hedonistic' lifestyle had higher crime rates because of factors such as frustrated poorly paid seasonal workers and drug subculture which lead to a greater incidence of theft. Furthermore, those resorts have a large number of night clubs which led to higher levels of alcohol-related offences such as fighting, rape and rowdy behaviour. However, the analysis of the customer reviews resulted in the absence of those behaviours, and many references were made related to safety issue, particularly striking examples are provided by the members of the online community: "Heard stories of people going out and about lots of hassle to buy by the locals but will say one thing felt safe walking around as plenty of police about", "The hotel complex took about 20mins to walk around completely and of an evening walk along was very lovely and you are completely safe as there is other hotels along side you as well as security walking about all the time".

Sense of beauty

Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggest that people value experiences that instil a sense of wonder, beauty and appreciation. Customers illustrated that they had a greater sense of beauty in their comments. Beauty is “an aspect of the experience of idealisation in which an object(s), sound(s), or concept(s) is believed to possess qualities of formal perfection” (Hagman, 2002, p.661). Sense of beauty has been recognized as an important human capacity and that the subjective experience of beauty is characterised by a sublime and exalted state that is unique, psychologically significant and desirable (Hagman, 2002). “The sense of beauty is the harmony between our nature and our experience. When our senses and imagination find what they crave, when the world so shapes itself or so moulds the mind that the correspondence between them is perfect, then perception is pleasure, and existence needs no apology (Santayana, 1896, p. 269)“ as cited in (Hagman, 2002). In the sense of beauty there is a feeling of wholeness, pleasure, lessening of anxiety, awe, joy, excitement, optimism and contentment (Hagman, 2002). The display of the beauty may be human made as found in art, reworks, architecture, or landscaped terrain (Stebbins, 1997), for example: “Walking through the grounds was difficult as we had to stop and admire the elegant and colourful landscaping at every turn and of course pose for photos.....Once we arrived at the top of the Domina Bay road, I was completely hypnotized by how beautiful the resort was.....Very beautiful hotel built on a hill with the reception/foyer/restaurants at the top. The rooms are all spread down the hillside and a waterfall runs down between them. There is a funicular railway/elevator that runs up and down the hillside which is very cool.....I read an earlier review by somebody that stated the entrance to the hotel reminded them of the entrance to Jurassic Park. How true! It was partly the thrill and relief of finally getting there (safely) and partly awe that made our eyes widen at the beauty of the resort as we got driven to our room on a golfing style buggy”

[Miss N Wooding, Crowne Plaza Resort Hotel Review, posted May 2008,

www.holidaywatchdog.com]

Similarly, the displays of beauty may be natural, as found in waterfalls, gardens coral reefs, or observing coloured fishes for their natural beauty. It is obvious, from the following posts that sense of beauty is linked to pleasurable experience evoking for customers: “The grounds are immaculate with bougainvillea, gardenia, and oleander. I don’t know how they grow in the dry sandy soil but everything is beautiful.....The grounds are covered with beautiful flowers and waterfalls which make it a magical place to spend some time with the person you love.....Within 3 feet of getting into the water you will see beautiful colourful fish and the reef even though damaged has hundreds of beautiful fish.....A glass bottom boat trip.....was the highlight of my holiday as we saw all the coral reefs, the fish were like nothing I have ever seen before....It brought tears to my eyes to see something so beautiful”

[Mrs LJ Langmead, Conrad Sharm El Sheikh Resort review, posted February 2008,

www.holidaywatchdog.com]

Relational

The netnography research captured another important component of customer experience which is the relational experience that involves the person, consumption or use of a product with other people (Gentile et al., 2007). Moreover, tourism provides an outlet for youth to experiencing sexuality and relationship (Page and Connelle, 2006). Relational experience appeared as an important factor in customers’ reviews. The results tend to confirm that social interaction is an integral part of their experience. It was evident that customer found interesting people with whom to develop a closer. For example “Staff was friendly... I and my friend Steph made good friends with 2 of the staff in the lobby bar.... Zazza (as I call him)

and Ali... such lovely guys and I actually miss them”. Another example by one female customer talking about her relationship with one member of the restaurant staff:

“While I was staying at Dreams beach I met someone known as Waggy, he works in the restaurant that is by the main pool. I had the chance to kiss him before Ramadan started and I didn’t dam it! I’m going back especially just to see him in February 2008. Really miss him loads, my family absolutely loved him and wanted him to marry me”

[Miss S Louise Read, Dreams Beach Hotel review, posted October 2008,
www.holidaywatchdog.com]

In the previous example, the peak experience turned out to be supporting consumer experience and becomes a background for the peak romantic experience (Quan and Wang, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Despite the importance of the theme of customer experience, the construct of customer experience is not well defined in the marketing literature (Carù and Cova, 2003). Few definitions of customer experience were presented in the literature (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Robinette et al., 2002; Shaw and Ivens, 2002; Meyer and Schweger, 2007; Gentil et al., 2007). Insufficient empirical research has been done on experience consumption from the consumer perspective. Therefore, this study attempted to gain meaningful degree of understanding of customer experience construct. The qualitative research captured numerous important components of customer experience which were consistent with previous studies. This study was conducted based on gaps found in the

literature concerning what is customer experience which is a poorly defined concept (Caru and cove, 2003) and what constitute customer experience. A theoretical contribution of this study is the netnography method (Kozinet, 1997, 1998, 2001 and 2002) used to uncover the dimensions of customer experience that helps the researcher to gain more understanding about the topic. Netnography has not been widely used as a marketing research technique. Only few marketing researchers have adapted netnographic methods (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998; Brown et al., 2003; Nelson and Otnes, 2005). Such an attempt should therefore set a new standard for research conducted in this field.

This study has focused on customer experience in the resort-hotel context from customer's perspective and its effect on brand loyalty. The results of this study suggest a number of implications for service, marketing and brand managers. Egypt as a global hotspot where there is a comprehensive and diversified tourism, aggressive expansion plans, new brand launches of hospitality establishments and an increasing number of tourists. The knowledge of customer experience and the challenge of creating great customer experience is of utmost importance. Many marketers acknowledge the importance of customer experience, but they have very little knowledge of what components of customer experience in the hotel context.

The researcher attempted to expand the understanding of the construct of customer experience. Although the endeavour was worthwhile, it was not without its limitations. First, the netnography study, by its nature, was restricted to those customers who send their reviews online. Moreover, the focus of the study was on customer reviews that written in English. The study did not consider those customers who have not post their reviews online. The results could be different if the study included both online and offline tourists community to examine their experiences. Therefore, care should be given in interpreting these findings.

Having identified the limitations of the study, this section then provides some suggestions for future research to extend the current body of knowledge in the literature on service marketing, consumer behaviour and branding. This study was the first study on the topic of customer experience in Egypt. Given the increasing attention to customer experience in the recent year, the lack of systematic and empirical research in this area is quite alarming (Gentile et al., 2007). This study has only examined customer experience with resort-hotel brands in Egypt which is significantly different when compared to other contexts. It would be interesting to examine customer experience in different types of businesses other than hospitality industry.

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