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Delivering integrated and customised service experiences within a heterogeneous cultural organisation

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Introduction

This investigation explores challenges in providing integrated and customised services across a heterogeneous cultural organisation. It contributes to contemporary research which increasingly looks at service experience in a number of contexts including public services (McColl-Kennedy, Janet R. Gustafsson et al., 2015), and emphasises the complexity of customer journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This study also aligns with research that considers the heterogeneity of cultural consumption (Marschall, 2014; McCamley & Gilmore, 2017) and tourists' experiences of intangible and tangible elements across a range of sites, some with connections of individual resonance (Poria & Ashworth, 2009; Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2004).

The national destination marketing organisation for Scotland, VisitScotland, has identified Ancestral Tourism as a growth market with the potential to benefit all regions of Scotland. Thus far, ancestral tourism research in Scotland has mainly focused on the rural and Highland regions of the country with the legacy of urban, industrial heritage largely absent from established ancestral narratives and tourist provision. This research explores the provision of ancestral tourism within an urban context and investigates the delivery and service experience within a specific organisational context while contributing to heritage tourism from a supplier perspective.

Glasgow Life is a semi-autonomous organisation within Glasgow City Council responsible for disparate functions and facilities, including museums, culture, sport and learning. It is charged with the delivery of social aims through its provision of facilities while using the same to encourage economic regeneration and growth through cultural tourism. As custodians of Glasgow's cultural and heritage assets, it promotes and encourages public access while maintaining the integrity of curatorial and archivist roles as well as preservation of objects and documents. Ancestral Tourism, largely consumed by the Scottish diaspora in the rest of the UK as well as overseas markets such as Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, has been identified for development by Glasgow Life from both social and economic perspectives. Glasgow Life seeks to match the city's offering of urban/industrial heritage with its ancestral tourism potential but needs to develop a strategy to align provision across its diverse array of subsidiary institutions, including museums, galleries, and archives.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to investigate provision and promotion of ancestral tourism across the museums, galleries and archives operated by Glasgow Life. Exploring staff experiences, this study investigates how these areas of the organisation deliver and connect their services in response to consumer demand. This exploration also aims to provide insights into how the organisation can integrate provision and promotion to deliver a more coherent service.

Methodology

The research was carried out just over a year from June 2016 to August 2017. Using qualitative methods and approaching the research from a subjectivist stance, data collection took the form of interviews, observation, and informal conversations with staff at Glasgow Life. Interviews were conducted with thirty-seven participants working across several levels and areas of the organisation, selected through a combination of snowballing and judgement. The researcher also recorded field notes from observations and informal conversations during attendance at training events and meetings within the organisation.

Findings

One of the challenges for organisations is understanding the multiple touch points that make up a service experience, some within their control, and some that are not (McColl-Kennedy, Janet R. Gustafsson et al., 2015). The fieldwork reveals a *“plethora of portals...currently unconnected in any way, in which customers/visitors can access our collections”* (Manager, Archives). Minimal control over these portals or ‘touch points’, can affect the overall service experience and the meeting of customer expectations (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Several participants highlight experiences with ancestral tourists with high or unrealistic expectations where *“the challenge is trying to find ways to meet these expectations”* (Manager, Family History Archives). Integration of service is exacerbated by the nature of many ancestral tourism encounters that often require individual attention and customisation (Murdy, Alexander, & Bryce, 2016). The findings reveal that ancestral tourists expect more of a customised service than staff were able to provide suggesting issues with the initial stages of the customer journey.

Currently, the marketing approach to ancestral tourism from Glasgow’s Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) is *“reactive rather than proactive”* (Marketing Manager, DMO), and focuses on the promotion of various archives that provide resources for detailed family history investigations. This research expands understanding of ancestral tourism with examples of ancestral tourists who do not or not only carry out detailed research but visit multiples sites with heritage collections that provide context to their ancestors’ lives. This research discovers ancestral tourists who are interested in the urban, industrial narratives of their ancestors’ lives and who want to *“visualise”* and *“have a broader picture of what their ancestors’ lives may have been like”* (Manager, Archives). The findings show that museums and archives provide this offering for ancestral tourists, but staff have limited familiarity with ancestral tourism external to their own areas of the organisation. This inhibits the potential for integrated ancestral tourism experiences.

Another challenge is the ‘myriad of touch points and resulting information overload’ (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016:76): the “information and signage is usually just overwhelming and too much to take in” (*Archive Assistant*). The complexity of information available not only compromises the likelihood of visiting places that could offer an ancestral tourism experience but could also affect the overall service experience. The recent merging of Glasgow’s DMO with Glasgow Life has the potential for more control over the multiple touch points in the customer journey, and to promote ancestral tourism to those who “have no interest in a research project” (*Archive Assistant*) and are put off by the complexity of information at various touchpoints. This not only allows for improvements in the service experience with less individual customisation required, but creates the opportunity to deliver a more holistic and satisfying ancestral tourism experience.

Discussion and Conclusion

Exploring ancestral tourism provision and promotion within this heterogeneous cultural organisation, the findings reveal challenges relating to the complexity of the customer journey and its effect on the ancestral tourism service experience.

The findings accentuate the importance of the ‘information gathering’ stage of the customer journey in ancestral tourism that can cause issues in terms of customer expectations. This research supports existing research that discusses difficulties in providing customised services for customers with high expectations (Murdy et al., 2016). McColl-Kennedy et al., (2015:431) emphasise that managing how customers begin a service journey, is ‘one of the main challenge that organizations face...given that customers differ in their role preferences, abilities and resources’. The organisation needs to develop understanding of how the initial points (or ‘pre-core stages’) influence expectations so that they should ‘strategically manage those initial touchpoints to enhance consumers’ desires for an offering, without inflating their expectations’ (Voorhees et al., 2017:273). The use of ‘nudges’ or strategies to influence and direct customers at these initial stages, has been highlighted as an effective tool that impacts the whole service experience (Voorhees et al., 2017).

A ‘plethora’ of touch points also creates a challenge for the organisation’s control of the service experience. The iterative and dynamic process of the customer journey has been discussed by Lemon and Verhoef (2016:69), where they emphasis the task of controlling the experience as customers interact ‘through myriad touch points in multiple channels and media’. Lemon and Verhoef (2016:78) also refer to types of touch points; some that are brand-owned (by the organisation), some partner-owned, and other that they have ‘no or minimal influence over (customer-owned, social/ external)’. In this specific organisational context, there are multiple areas that provide and promote ancestral tourism, some that are not brand-owned. Research on ancestral tourism provision in Scotland in general has highlighted the disjointed and inconsistent network across the country (Alexander, Bryce, & Murdy, 2017; Durie, 2013). Therefore, taking a ‘network perspective’ (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) of the customer journey, considering the broader service delivery, is critical in order to strengthen the service experience. Contemporary research on service experience also accentuates the importance of ‘a holistic service experience’ that ‘compromises the pre-core, core and post-core service

encounter periods' (Voorhees et al., 2017:269). Lemon and Verhoef (2016:83) agree that to create better integration, influence, and a 'seamless service experience', organisations should design and manage this entire process.

This research expands understanding of ancestral tourism with potential for 'light-touch ancestry' (Wright, 2009), to promote and package ancestral tourism that could generate income for the organisation, integrate service, and goes beyond the promotion of archives, also accentuating intangible elements of Glasgow's cultural and heritage offering. The findings tie into discussion on heritage tourism as individually experienced with the consumption of tangible and intangible elements across a range of sites that tourists perceive as being part of their own heritage (Alexander et al., 2017; McDonald, 2011; Poria & Ashworth, 2009). Incorporating this knowledge into the customer journey, the organisation has the potential to improve the service experience by considering this broader service delivery (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and providing a more coherent and integrated ancestral tourism service.

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