

Consumer-led experience customization: A socio-spatial approach

Edwin N. Torres, Ph.D. ^a
Peter Lugosi, Ph.D. ^{b*}
Marissa Orłowski, Ph.D. ^a
Giulio Ronzoni ^a

^a Rosen College of Hospitality Management
University of Central Florida

^b Oxford School of Hospitality Management
Oxford Brookes University
(*Corresponding author)
plugosi@brookes.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Adopting a socio-spatial approach, this study develops a consumer-centric conception of service experience customization. In contrast to existing service customization research, which has focused on company-centric approaches, this study examines the practices through which consumers use, abuse, subvert, transform or complement organizational resources to construct their consumption experiences.

Design/Methodology: The empirical context for this study is a Meetup group: a consumer network organized around members' shared interests and activities in theme parks. The research utilized participant observation of members' face-to-face activities during two years and over 80 events, interviews with key informants, and content analysis of online interactions.

Findings: The findings outline how consumers interact across physical and virtual spaces utilizing technologies and material objects. The data are used to propose a new consumer-centric conceptualization of experience customization, distinguishing between three modes: collaborative co-production, cooperative co-creation, and subversive co-creation.

Originality/Value: It is argued that the three modes of customization provide a way to understand how consumers mobilize and (re)deploy organizational resources to create experiences that may complement existing service propositions, but may also transform them in ways that challenge the service provider's original goals and expectations. Furthermore, this study identifies the factors that shape which modes of customization are possible and how they are enacted. Specifically, the discussion examines how experiential complexity, governability, the compatibility of consumer and organizational practices, and the collective mobilization of resources may determine the scope and form of customization.

Key words: Co-creation, Consumer practices, Experience, Experience customization, Space, Socio-materiality

1. Introduction

As consumer demands have become more fragmented and markets have evolved, marketers and service providers have attempted to appeal to various kinds of consumer segments by creating customized offerings (Gilmore and Pine, 2000). In addition to the deployment of customization techniques, research has pointed to the role of consumers in co-creating value with organizations (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013; Rihova *et al.*, 2013). Despite the advances in the academic and practical understanding of customization and the growing focus on co-creation in services, existing research on the subject has conceived of customization as an organization-centric process orchestrated by service providers (Bettencourt and Gwinner, 1996; Levesque and Boeck, 2017; Silvestro and Lustrato, 2015). In contrast, this study proposes a consumer-centric conception of customization, arguing that this helps to account more clearly for the practices through which consumers use, abuse, subvert, transform or complement the organization's resources in (re)constructing their consumption experiences.

The present research adopts a socio-spatial approach, examining how consumer activities in physical and virtual spaces, involving technologies, material objects, and embodied actions, drive consumer-led customization. Such an approach builds on the premise that service spaces are not static entities or configurations of physical fixtures. Rather, spaces are (re)constructed through the dynamic interactions of human behaviors, technologies and material objects (Johnstone, 2012; Lugosi, 2014; Nilsson and Ballantyne,

2014); and, they are increasingly taking virtual forms (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). The production and consumption of service spaces involve the convergence of different actors, with diverse goals, values and capacities (Johnstone and Todd, 2012; Lugosi *et al.*, 2016a; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the behaviors and norms associated with specific service spaces, and their consequences (e.g. the sensations, evaluations and meanings attached to these spaces) are negotiated by its users (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; Johnstone, 2012; Lugosi *et al.*, 2016b).

In adopting a socio-spatial approach, this study responds to Jaakkola *et al.*'s (2015) call to examine the spatial and temporal dimensions of service co-creation. More specifically, Ellway and Dean (2016) and Jaakkola *et al.* (2015) stress that consumer experiences and co-creation practices materialize across multiple spaces, rather than just within the servicescape. As Tynan *et al.* (2014) highlight, consumers engage with organizations through numerous touchpoints, and their consumption choices and evaluations are informed by past, present and future experiences. As such, value creation should be seen as emerging over time (Helkkula *et al.*, 2012a). Jaakkola *et al.* (2015) argued that the spatial-temporal elements in service experiences have not been sufficiently examined. Developing such an understanding therefore adds to knowledge of consumers' value-creating practices. Furthermore, by studying where and when consumer practices operate, the present research also responds to earlier calls by Arnould *et al.* (2006), Payne *et al.* (2008) and McColl-Kennedy *et al.* (2012, p. 371) "to understand what customers actually *do* when they co-create value." As these authors argue, despite multiple studies focusing on the conceptualization of co-creation, more studies are required to understand how co-creation actually occurs and the practices consumers adopt in joint value creation.

The current research seeks to examine the role of customer-to-customer interactions and associated practices in the customization of experiences. More importantly, this research distinguishes between three modes of customization: collaborative co-production, cooperative co-creation, and subversive co-creation, and argues that this conception provides a way to understand how consumers (re)deploy organizational resources to create experiences that may complement existing service propositions, transform them in constructive ways, or reconstruct them in more radical and potentially disruptive ways.

This inquiry attempts to understand co-creation by looking at everyday non-routinized actions and more established, routinized practices among consumers. Previous researchers have adopted social practice theory approaches in attempting to account for consumers' activities [see Reckwitz (2002) for a more general discussion of social practices theory; Warde (2005) for the linkages between consumption and practice theory; and Helkkula *et al.* (2012b), Holttinen (2010), and McColl-Kennedy *et al.* (2012) for discussion of a practices approach to service experiences]. In previous studies, social practices have been understood as routinized activities, and researchers have sought to understand their formation and (re)production by looking at humans at the expense of broader social-material forms of agency. In contrast, the present research acknowledges the possibility for non-human 'actors' (including, for example, objects and technologies) to exert influence in networks of relationships (cf. Latour, 2005). Customization in this study is approached as fundamentally messy, interrelated practices involving actors engaging in multiple activities in various spaces and times to co-create bespoke experiences. These include embodied practices (organizing, drinking, walking, etc.), utilizing material 'things' (in this case, foodstuffs, clothing, etc.), and verbal, textual and visual representations, particularly via social media technologies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Customization and co-creation

The notion of customization emerged from the manufacturing sector, reflecting a shift from principles of standardization and mass production to a more refined tailoring of products to suit customers' demands (cf. Duray, 2002; Fogliatto *et al.*, 2012). One of the earlier terms coined to describe the adaptation of standardized products to niche consumer segments was 'mass customization'. According to Da Silveira *et al.* (2001), "mass customization relates to the ability to provide customized products or services through flexible processes in high volumes and at reasonably low costs" (p. 1). As Lusch and Vargo (2014) posit, mass customization can be seen as a precursor to co-creation insofar as its advocates attempted to conceptualize the practices required to adapt products and services to better respond to diverse consumer demands.

Gilmore and Pine (2000) also advocated the adoption of mass customization principles to both goods and services by placing greater emphasis on the customer's ability to select changes to components of the product or service or different sequences in which products or services are included and/or consumed. Importantly, the emphasis remained on businesses adjusting elements of products and services and/or presenting different scenarios for consumers, allowing them to have greater input, which could be used by suppliers or producers to tailor offerings.

More recently, increased attention has been given to customization in services (e.g. Bettencourt and Gwinner, 1996; Levesque and Boeck, 2017; Silvestro and Lustrato, 2015) and in consumption experiences (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2015). This body of literature suggests that mass customization may be a useful way to conceptualize an organization's strategic choices regarding flexible and responsive approaches to product development, marketing, operations, and customer relationship management. It also serves as an important reminder that service experiences continue to rely on organizations' technologies, objects, human capital, spaces and processes; organizations assemble and mobilize these resources to facilitate consumers' creation of value-in-use (Grönroos, 2008). However, it is important to stress that the focus of the customization literature, has remained on the organization (Kristensson *et al.*, 2008), particularly on technological strategies and platforms firms can develop to facilitate consumer customization (Barman and Canizares, 2015), or on the use of human capital to customize service experiences (cf. Gwinner *et al.*, 2005; McCarthy *et al.*, 2011). Given the shift in focus on the role of consumers (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011; Fisher and Smith, 2011; Grönroos, 2011), there is a need to account more clearly for the ways in which they exert power and agency in their engagement with organizational resources – driving, shaping and, in effect, enacting customization.

Co-creation can be considered an evolution of the customization philosophy, which appreciates and integrates consumer agency more broadly in its understanding of customer-organization interactions and value creation (cf. Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Heinonen *et al.*, 2013; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). The notion of co-creation suggests that value is generated jointly between the customer and producer via the application of their own respective resources and competencies (Vargo *et al.*, 2008). This concept presented a shift from a firm- and product-centric view to a personalized customer experience.

Within the co-creation paradigm, the customer is seen as co-producer (Lusch and Vargo, 2014; Vargo and Lusch, 2016), and value is created 'in-use', representing new forms of empowerment as consumers determine or realize the potential of any configuration of

spatial, procedural, technological and material resources assembled by the organization (Grönroos, 2008, 2011). Kristensson *et al.* (2008) proposed that the difference between co-creation and customization lies in the degree of customer involvement and that value creation in customization is derived through the production process rather than the consumption process. Similarly, Chathoth *et al.* (2013) conceptualized customization as a midpoint in a process-based continuum anchored by co-production on one end and co-creation on the other. Within the continuum framework, they suggested there can be degrees of customer involvement and the extent of this involvement determines whether customization lies closer to co-production or co-creation. Customer-driven customization is then predicated on the level of customer involvement, particularly in the deployment of skills, knowledge and other resources, and may occur during consumption. Importantly, it also points to different outcomes, which may correspond or conflict with the organization's conception of the service processes.

In the service environment, co-production thus refers primarily to customers' participation in transactional processes in functional ways, which conform to organizations' preconceived service propositions and correspond to the service design. Customer input may, therefore, help to make transactions more efficient, effective and thus satisfactory (Bitner *et al.*, 1997). However, their actions and interactions do not necessarily alter the servicescape or the service processes in unanticipated or disruptive ways. Co-creation presents a higher level of customer engagement whereby value is created jointly as customers and organizations use their own skills and competencies in increasingly sophisticated ways to create new services and experiences. In this sense, co-creation has the potential to be positively and negatively disruptive. These concepts are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they can be seen in a continuum ranging from co-production to co-creation, as the level, scope and complexity of customer involvement in customization increases and as the service or experience is transformed.

In summary, within this study, the concepts of 'co-creation' and 'customization' have distinct but complementary conceptual roles. Co-creation provides the conceptual context for the study, helping first to appreciate the potential shift in power away from the organization to the customer as value creator; and second, to acknowledge the different capacities deployed by consumers in the value creation process. Customization acts as a more specific sensitizing focal concept, placing emphasis on how *consumers* may use, abuse, subvert, transform or complement the *organization's resources* in (re)constructing their service or consumption experiences. However, this paper stresses that customization can take simpler and more functional forms, requiring less effort and fewer resources (i.e. in co-production practices). Conversely, customization may also take potentially more complex, disruptive forms that require multiple resources and capacities (i.e. in co-creation practices).

2.2 Processes and domains in co-creation and customization

According to Payne *et al.* (2008) co-creation is composed of three components: 1) customer value-creating processes, 2) supplier value-creating processes, and 3) encounter processes. Within this co-creation logic, consumers can exercise various roles in the value co-creation process: a (paying) customer, quality controller, service co-producer, and/or a co-marketer, all of which require mobilizing personal capacities and resources (Arnould *et al.*, 2006; Storbacka and Lehtinen, 2001). Consumers can thus be understood to customize service experiences and interactions by engaging in prior research and learning, providing

information, taking responsibility for choices and carrying out practical activities in the service encounter (Bitner *et al.*, 1997).

Grönroos and Voima (2013) distinguished between different 'spheres' of interaction through which value can be created, stressing that different types of performative activities are enacted in different socio-spatial contexts. The two most important contextual spheres for the current discussion are the 'customer sphere', essentially spaces (and times) in which value is created by consumers outside of direct interactions with the organization, and the 'joint sphere' where (and when) consumers come into physical and digital contact with organizations.

Grönroos and Voima (2013) argue that within the 'customer sphere', consumers engage in goal setting, learning and knowledge generation, the evaluation of previous experiences, and social interactions, which also shape the aforementioned factors and inform future behaviors. Heinonen *et al.* (2010) stressed that many of the consumer activities in this sphere, such as interacting with other consumers or conducting background research, were indirectly related to service interactions. In other words, they shaped future service experiences but remained invisible to organizations. Moreover, as Heinonen *et al.* (2010) emphasized, the absence of interaction with the organization means it cannot directly control or influence this sphere of consumer behavior, although it may do so indirectly by engaging with other consumers. Heinonen *et al.* (2013) further argued that value is formed in consumers' lives and social eco-systems. Consequently, value formation should be examined not as the activities of isolated consumers, but instead as the actions of a configuration of actors. This helps to highlight the importance of social interactions and relationships in the 'customer' sphere in order to understand consumers' co-creation practices, and also complements existing work on consumer tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002) and brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), which places relationality as a central explanatory concept in its analysis of consumer behavior.

Grönroos and Voima's (2013) 'joint sphere' in the co-creation process is traditionally where customization has been positioned. As Heinonen *et al.* (2010) proposed, this is where core customer activities – those central to service transactions – take place, thus becoming visible for organizations. Within this sphere, the provider establishes flexibility in the service or experience provision, modes of feedback, and responsive systems through which consumers can adapt and adopt factors within consumption activities. Importantly, customers maintain a key role in mobilizing their 'operand' and 'operant' resources (Arnould *et al.*, 2006), which may be economic, social or cultural. For example, consumers may use their knowledge to make choices concerning different components of services or to select different sequences in activities, along with the more mundane aspects of experience co-production (e.g. attend, pay, wait in line, etc.).

Such a conceptualization of the consumer's roles in co-creation is useful because it helps foreground the spatial and temporal aspects, which in turn aids in further understanding of consumer behaviors. Furthermore, such a perspective places the organization as a 'facilitator' of value creation, while arguing that value is created 'in use', principally by consumers. Prior research has considered the importance of the spaces in which services take place (Bitner, 1992). However, the emphasis in the servicescape literature is on how space is created and managed by the service provider and encountered/perceived by consumers (cf. Berry *et al.*, 2006; Grayson and McNeill, 2009; Parish *et al.*, 2008; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). Aubert-Gamet (1997) and other works have gone further in considering how consumers use, and importantly, subvert service spaces (e.g. Lugosi, 2009). Nevertheless, the emphasis in this

body of research has been on the specific service environment. Heinonen *et al.* (2010) highlighted that a significant challenge for researching service experiences concerned when and where they started and they ended (see also Heinonen *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, Jaakkola *et al.* (2015) argued that the temporal and spatial aspects of service experiences co-creation have not been sufficiently examined – pointing to the need to develop a better understanding of how experiences are constructed in and across numerous spaces over time.

Thus, the current study extends and contributes to this line of inquiry by considering how service experience customization emerges or is enacted in and across multiple virtual and physical spaces and times. More specifically, rather than approaching customization as firm-centric practices, this study seeks to explore how consumers selectively redeploy or redefine organizational resources. The present research examines the ability of non-human factors, including technologies and materiality, alongside embodied, performative aspects of consumer behavior, to construct consumer spaces and experiences. It is argued that customization operates through socio-material practices that may complement or contradict the organization's attempts to define experiences. Importantly, the current study also seeks to understand how consumer behavior in the 'customer sphere' also shapes how service and consumer experiences are (re)constructed (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010, 2013). In effect, this study examines how consumer customization is enacted within and beyond organization-customer interactions and direct contact zones. This is significant because it creates a framework for studying consumer-led customization activities in other service and experiential consumption contexts.

2.3 Socio-spatial dimensions of experiences and practices

As noted above, conceptions of space and materiality in services management research have focused predominantly on the servicescape or service environment – examining the management of the physical evidence and the ambient conditions, and their influence on consumer behavior (see Mari and Poggesi, 2013). However, researchers concerned with consumer experiences have begun to engage with geographical approaches, adopting more complex conceptions of space and materiality (cf. Johnstone, 2012; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003, 2010).

Spaces are (re)produced through human actions and interactions, the mobilization of various knowledge, competencies and resources, and through the deployment of objects. These practices are often manifested in the form of visual and textual representations and associated acts of naming, valuation and categorization (cf. Cochoy, 2008; Lugosi, 2016). Spaces are therefore not seen as passive or stable entities that merely act as psychological stimuli (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003); rather, spaces, and the experiences of spaces, are actively (re)constructed through productive relationships between people, objects, and technologies. Importantly, the qualities, functions, and values associated with spaces are contested by multiple stakeholders.

Adopting such a dynamic socio-spatial approach to services and experiences is central to examining customization. Experiences of service spaces often involve symbolic, affective qualities as well as functional qualities or dimensions; experiences have also been linked to consumers' sense of identity, wellbeing, social status, and belonging to real or imagined groups (cf. Cova and Cova, 2002; Cova *et al.*, 2007; Holbrook, 1996, 1999; Nilsson and Ballantyne, 2014; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). Experiences are thus entangled with different forms of value for consumers.

Holbrook (1996; 1999) distinguished between eight fundamental types of social value, which are often part of an organization's service proposition for customers, but may emerge through consumers' practices: Efficiency, Play, Excellence, Aesthetics, Status, Ethics, Spirituality, and Esteem. These values might be seen at different phases of the consumption experience, from initial points of desire through to information collection, decision making, and direct encounters with organizations, post-experience recollection, evaluation, representations, and subsequent purchase decisions. The consumption experience unfolds in and across multiple times and spaces, both physical and virtual. Notably, consumers have numerous incentives to invest and engage in the value-creation process at multiple points in space and time (cf. Lamers *et al.*, 2017; Mickelsson, 2013; Tynan *et al.*, 2014).

Ellway and Dean (2016) examined the interactions between experiences and practices. The authors defined practice as "what customers 'do' using service offerings and personal resources including mental activities to create value in their everyday lives" (p. 302). Writers in the service management literature posit that practices involve bodily techniques, knowledge and other competencies, (shared) meanings, technologies and objects that are utilized in more or less routinized behaviors (Helkkula *et al.*, 2012a; Holttinen, 2010; McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012). The enactment of practices leads to various outcomes, including the creation of value in and through experiences (Helkkula *et al.*, 2012b; Lamers *et al.*, 2017). More importantly, following Korkman *et al.* (2010), Ellway and Dean (2016) stressed that practices involve the integration of organizational, group and individual resources in value creation. These resources include material objects, technologies and capital, skills and knowledge. This helps to stress that practices have to be considered in relation to the social and situational contexts in which they operate, while recognizing the potential for individual agency to shape how they are performed. This scope for examining the contexts, actors and processes in value creation is critical to the current study of consumer-led experience customization. It focuses attention on the dynamic practices through which consumers integrate and utilize organizational resources, technologies and human competencies to create their shared experiences.

Ellway and Dean (2016) and Helkkula *et al.* (2012a) are also explicit in considering the temporal aspects of practices and value creation in experiences. Value creation "draws from the past, is situated in the present, and influences the future" (Ellway and Dean, 2016, p. 304). Implicit to such a multi-temporal analysis is the acknowledgement that practices occur in multiple locations or spaces, and thus involve other actors. Given that the co-creation literature identified above stressed that activities emerge in different spheres (Grönroos and Voima, 2013), involving actions and processes in consumers' domains (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010), a practices perspective that is sensitive to matters of space and time is highly relevant for studying experience customization.

As noted at the outset, authors such as Arnould *et al.* (2006) and Payne *et al.* (2008) challenged researchers to account more clearly for the practices involved in co-creation, and to provide a clearer understanding of how value co-creation operates across times and spaces (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015). Accordingly, this paper seeks to deploy a socio-spatial understanding of co-creation, focusing on practices of consumer-driven customization. However, the aim is not to focus on practice as the unit of analysis; for example, developing a typology of practices (cf. Echeverri and Skålén, 2011). Nevertheless, adopting a broad, practice-based approach offers a context and process-sensitive way to understand how consumers redefine the functions and meanings of organizational resources, and how they redeploy them in constructing their experiences. Moreover, the empirical data are used to distinguish between

different forms of customization, which helps to appreciate how they may co-exist with, complement, or conflict with an organization's intended experiential propositions.

3. Methods

3.1 *Research context*

The empirical context for the study is a Meetup group: a network of consumers based in Florida, USA, whose interactions and collective activities are built around a shared interest in theme park visits and experiences. It will be referred to by the pseudonym 'Theme Park Fun' (TPF). Meetup is an online international network of groups that supports face-to-face interactions and allows members to find and join groups developed around a common interest [I]. As an electronic-to-face (E2F) community, Meetup extends the concept of a virtual community by providing a means for group members to plan and schedule live events and interact with each other offline. At the time of writing, Meetup was the world's largest social network of local groups, comprising 30.33 million members, over 272,000 groups, and over 608,000 monthly events, which members typically refer to as 'meetups' [I]. Meetup has an active presence in 180 countries, including France, Germany, Spain, and Brazil, and its apps are available in English, Spanish, French, German, Japanese, Italian, and Portuguese [II]. In this study, a Meetup group was followed over the course of two years and over 80 events.

The choice of a Meetup group for this study was important for several reasons. First, the Meetup platform allows people to form communities around common activities, interests, and opinions. Although there have been a number of studies on the subject of customization and co-creation, few address what customers actually 'do' to customize experiences. Therefore, this study is in line with Ellway and Dean's (2016) exhortation to analyse the links between practice and experience in the service setting. Second, because it operated across multiple virtual and physical spaces, it helped to examine the spatial aspects of consumer-led customization, particularly as practices in one spatial domain shaped activities in others. Third, Meetup groups are fluid, organic entities. Individuals apply to form a group, and once approved, Meetup announces the new group to all members within the appropriate geographic area. Provided the group organizer and event hosts follow Meetup's rules for content, usage, and standards [III], the group is self-sustaining through the activities of its members. Unlike consumer communities created by organizations, the Meetup platform enables consumers to take initiative and manage their relationships with brands and businesses. This organic nature a) helped to understand how customization activities evolved over time and b) provided insights into how disparate actors engaged in various practices to sustain a group whose collective interests and ongoing interactions were defined by the desire to create, consume and share unique (customized) experiences.

At the beginning of the study, TPF had been an official group on Meetup for one year, with approximately 200 online members, 30 of whom were actively involved in the group's events. At the close of the study's two-year observation period, TPF had over 1,000 online members, and approximately 100 members actively attending events. Most of the active members held an annual pass to TPF's preferred theme park resort. According to the group's posted rules, members were required to be between the ages of 25-48, and most members were in their mid-30's. Based on occupations, spending habits, ownership of objects and property, and other data gathered by the principal investigator (PI), it was concluded that, from a socio-economic perspective, most members were either middle or upper-middle class.

3.2 Research approach and data collection

This study adopted an inductive, interpretivist approach using participant observation and interviews with selected informants, as well as content analysis of online data generated by the group's members. Following Lincoln and Guba (2013), the use of data triangulation helped to ensure the credibility of the findings. Moreover, this combination of methods was found especially suitable given the multi-spatial examination of customization practices in the study. This study builds on and is thus positioned alongside other qualitative research that seeks to understand the contextual nature of relationships, interdependence and shared practice in consumer behavior, especially when it takes place across virtual and physical spaces (cf. Cova and Cova, 2002; Kozinets, 2015; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

The PI owned an annual pass to a theme park resort and thus was able to join the TPF group and engage with its members as a participant observer. Over the course of the observation period, the PI attended 60 official events (ones posted and promoted on TPF's Meetup site) and over 20 unofficial events (invitation-only events organized by a group member and limited to a sub-group or small faction of members) in Florida, USA. As each event lasted approximately five hours, the PI observed approximately 400 hours of offline (face-to-face) interactions among group members and engaged in informal conversations. The PI operated as an active member of the group by participating regularly in both official and unofficial events, but did not take on a leadership role.

Data collection and recording took place throughout the course of each interaction. Basic notes and observations were covertly recorded in the theme park using the 'Notes' feature of a smartphone, which were expanded on after each interaction in the form of a journal entry. Additionally, photographs and records posted on the TPF Meetup website aided in the recall of official events. The generation of rich descriptive data, and the collection of data over an extended period, involving multiple points in time, were also part of the triangulation strategy supporting the credibility and dependability of the findings (see Lincoln and Guba, 2013).

The researchers also engaged in the collection of the TPF members' online exchanges as part of a broader inductive investigative strategy to better understand how virtual and physical spaces were interconnected in the group's practices (see Lugosi *et al.*, 2012). This approach adopted some of the netnographic techniques advocated by Kozinets (2015), as it involved repeated, albeit largely passive, observation of TPF's virtual platforms. As a TPF member, the PI was invited to join the TPF Facebook group, which was formed approximately 20 months into the observation period. TPF members used this forum to discuss a wide variety of topics including event preferences and evaluations, their love of theme parks, and best practices regarding how to maximize the theme park experience. Approximately 1,000 conversations were collected over a two-month period documenting pre-event planning and preparation, the coordination of activities, and post-event evaluation.

Finally, after three members of the research team reviewed the field notes from the event observations and the coding schemes developed from the Facebook content analysis, it was decided that interviews would enhance the credibility of the findings. Three key informants were identified purposefully due to their roles and practices and interviewed: the primary TPF organizer/founder and two of the most active hosts, who were responsible for planning many of the group's events. The semi-structured interviews took place after the informants were debriefed. The interview topics included reasons for the group's inception, types of events offered and challenges associated with the different event types, reasons for members to join and to leave the group, and clarity of roles. In addition to taking notes during

the interview, the interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed by the third author in preparation for analysis.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

As this study evolved, it moved from covert to semi-covert to overt methods of data collection. More specifically, the initial observation of the group's live interactions was covert in nature, the netnographic data collection was semi-covert, and the interviews with key informants were overt. Multiple safeguards were utilized by the researchers to ensure the appropriate and ethical use of these various methods. For example, care was taken to protect any information capable of identifying informants. Pseudonyms are used for the official Meetup group name and individual informants, and specific dates and locations are not included in the findings or discussion. Many of the group's live activities took place within the confines of the theme park resort (including the theme parks and their food and beverage outlets), which are public spaces and less susceptible to invasion of privacy. Semi-structured interviews with the TPF organizer and event hosts were conducted with full disclosure of the study's purpose in advance of the scheduled interviews. The netnographic phase of the study was semi-covert in nature. At the point in which the data were collected, many members were aware of the ongoing study, but the official debriefing statement was not published until after data collection ended.

The treatment of the data also followed ethical procedures with key themes being identified, categorized, and quantified. Reporting general trends makes it more difficult to pinpoint a specific informant; still, whenever a direct quote was utilized to provide specific evidence for a general finding, pseudonyms were utilized to ensure the informant's anonymity. In summary, the ethical practice of qualitative research was ensured by: a) gaining IRB approval, b) relying heavily on data collected in public settings, c) using pseudonyms for the group, individuals, and locations to safeguard anonymity, d) aggregating data and publishing global trends as much as possible, e) avoiding publishing images that could be used to identify people, and f) debriefing informants.

3.4 Data analysis

This study adopted an 'aphilosophical' approach to thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke, 2006); in other words, the analysis was not constrained by the adoption of a normative approach (e.g. interpretative phenomenological analysis). Nevertheless, concepts surrounding co-created activities, socio-materiality and spatial-temporal dimensions were used as 'sensitizing concepts' (cf. Patton, 2015) to interpret and order data. To further enhance the credibility of the analysis, 'researcher triangulation' was employed (Denzin, 2009), in which three of the four authors initially categorized and reviewed the data throughout the collection process. In order to explore the emerging issues and to further support the credibility of the conclusions, all four authors reexamined the data, challenging the assumptions of the previous rounds of analysis, and developing new interpretations. This involved the creation of a narrative, a thematic account of the findings, which was read critically by the other authors and interpreted through engagement with the customization and co-creation literature. The interpretative process focused on a small number of fundamental questions: *who* engaged in *what* activities, *where*, *when* and *how* in the (re)deployment of organizational resources and construction of experiences. Consequently, in the construction of this manuscript, the narrative data were reordered under the three key thematic areas based on the extent to which consumers' customization activities complemented, enhanced or diverged from the experiential propositions of the theme park

resort. This led to a subsequent exploration of the factors that shaped the adoption of the different customization modes.

4. Findings

The multi-staged, interactive processes of data (re-)analysis helped to distinguish between three different modes of consumer-led customization, which operate on a continuum: cooperative co-production, compatible co-creation, and subversive co-creation (see Figure 1). At one end are activities involving consumers' actions and uses of organizational resources that correspond to the organization's experiential propositions and expectations. These actions require consumer participation but are not necessarily creative or disruptive. At the other end of the continuum are activities that are far less predictable and require increasingly complex and creative actions by consumers, leading to experiences that diverge from the organization's expectations.

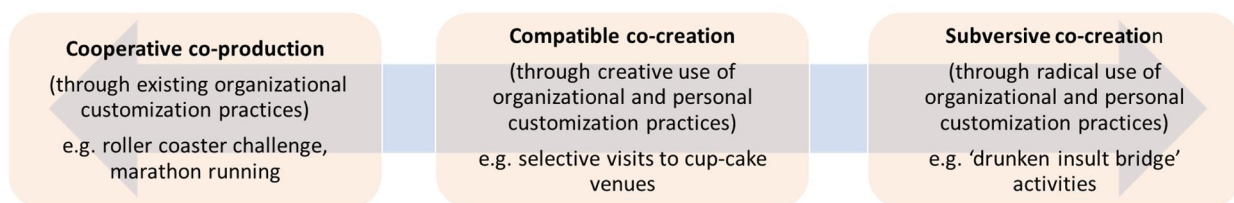


Figure 1. Three modes of consumer-led customization

4.1 Cooperative co-production

During a visit to one of the parks in the resort, group member Mark remarked:

“Some people [outside of the group] ask me ‘don’t you get bored of going to the same places?’...they don’t get it: with all the possible things to do, eat, see, and people to experience them with it’s hard to get bored. I can do something different every time I visit”.

Notably, consumers' cooperative efforts shaped the different forms that consumption experiences took. Cooperative co-production refers to group and individual actions that are in line with a business' (in this case, a theme park's) standard offering. For example, members cooperated in co-production when they participated in regular theme park activities such as purchasing tickets, inviting others to participate, purchasing food and merchandise, going on rides, and running in the marathons organized by the theme park resort. Customization practices included the re-sequencing of activities, such as arranging to experience certain rides and attractions at different times. However, customization also involved assigning new values to activities, attractions and facilities that formed the existing part of the service provider's experiential propositions. For instance, TPF members created a 'rollercoaster challenge', the objective of which was to ride all the rollercoasters in the various theme parks in one day.

Customization in the form of cooperative co-production also involved the selection and purchasing of products and services in the service environment, as well as mobilizing fellow members through virtual interactions in social media spaces. Critically, consumption practices in the physical service spaces began to be articulated, refined and coordinated from these

virtual spheres outside of the temporal bounds of the actual visits. Specifically, it was a common occurrence for group members to make reservations at the theme park resort's signature restaurants months in advance and eat dinner together. Similarly, 'afternoon tea' in the theme park's resort hotels and 'character meet and greets', in which guests could interact and take photos with the park's signature characters from movies and television, were organized by the theme park but coordinated and experienced by TPF members as a group.

4.2 Compatible co-creation

A greater level of customization of the guest experience was enacted through compatible co-creation. This refers to practices where consumers redefined and/or redeployed the service provider's resources in ways that complemented and often enhanced the experiences envisioned in the provider's original propositions. Throughout the observation period, TPF members exhibited creativity in organizing special events and transforming the theme park in ways that remained in line with the purpose of the attraction. One popular event was the theme park scavenger hunt. In order to execute this event, an event host would create various clues. Members followed the clues and took pictures at different parts of the theme park to evidence their task completion. This type of event helped people become more familiar with various sites in the theme park while reducing the potential for satiation (i.e. boredom), which would normally be associated with a repeated pattern of visitation. For one specific scavenger hunt, TPF organizers created a mobile application that allowed participants to view 'auras' throughout the park as they completed the hunt. This event received high praise on the TPF Facebook page. One TPF member said that "it was the coolest, most hi-tech, the most awesome scavenger hunt I ever participated in! I literally can't stop bragging about those awesome auras to my friends and family." Another member said the event managed to "blow their expectations." These positive feedback activities are highlighted because they arguably had numerous functions: first, they publicly recognized individual consumer competencies; second, they foregrounded the value-in-use of the experience; and third, they articulated outcomes in relation to group practices, thus reinforcing the collective nature of experience customization. This was reflected during an interview with Eileen, an event host. When asked about her preferences for organizing particular events she noted: "I really enjoy organizing larger events such as the scavenger hunts. These are a great opportunity to bring much of the group together and get them to experience parts of the theme park they haven't seen before."

Another example of cooperative co-creation was the 'cupcake crawl', organized by one member who was fond of desserts. During these events, members toured the various theme parks with the sole objective of tasting every different cupcake baked in each one of the parks. Interestingly, members did not enter a single ride or view a single show, even though these attractions are what the parks are known for. Instead, they enjoyed cupcakes and each other's company. The geographical location of the cupcake outlets provided a number of potential spatial configurations for visitor behavior, and it is important to acknowledge this form of agency in shaping subsequent customization. However, the consumers created their customized experiences by enacting the 'crawl' and assigning value to their routes, the stops, the foodstuffs, and the activities of shared eating.

An additional event that members participated in every year was called 'dapper day'. The event was organized by another passholder community and attempted to engage as many passholders as possible. During this event, members would dress up in formal attire,

mostly reminiscent of the early 1900's, in order to visit the park. The clothes matched the décor in a section of one of the theme parks. In this regard, members were not only enjoying the experience, but also were able to feel like characters in the theme park story. Although members did partake in some of the regular activities, such as rides, shows, and restaurant visits, they were also able to take professional pictures with friends and engage in 'people-watching' of others visiting the park. While participating in this activity, Jennifer, a group member remarked "I love dapper day! I enjoy 'people watching' throughout the day. Some people put so much creativity and energy into their outfits".

Over time, the co-creation of customized experiences within the theme park setting led to sub-groups of individuals who enjoyed one type of event over others. A group of TPF members enjoyed running marathons, which were offered by the theme park resort at various times during the year. The group would plan to participate, occasionally train together, and in the evening prior to the big race organize a 'carb overload' event at a local restaurant. TPF members were also encouraged via social media platforms to form a 'cheer squad' to support members who dressed in costumes and ran in the marathons.

4.3 Subversive co-creation

A third type of co-created experience customization was evident when groups identified alternative ways to re-use space, products or services in a manner that contradicted the original mission of the organization. One popular TPF activity was a theme park 'hotel bar crawl'. Several of the park's hotels were linked via geographical proximity and a common means of transportation. Members took advantage of this and created their own event, whereby participants would visit each of the theme park hotel bars for at least one hour, drink alcohol, and then move to the next property, while using the resort's transportation. Whereas most of the event was harmless, the presence of a large group, drinking alcoholic beverages and singing songs, contrasted with the wholesome, family-centric experiential proposition of the theme park resort. During one of these crawls, members boarded the transportation with drinks at hand and burst into song. This was received with impressions of both amusement and aversion from the rest of the public on-board.

In a similar vein, a sub-group of TPF which enjoyed the property's waterpark came across a bridge that overlooked the river running through the venue. Members of the group would stand on the bridge, consume alcoholic beverages, and poke fun (amongst themselves) at some of the individuals going on the ride. When a new member came, they were told by group member Marjorie: "We call this place the 'drunken insult bridge'...basically we get a drink, observe people as they float below in the lazy river, make up jokes and stories". Importantly, the act of naming (or inscription) served to redefine the meanings associated with the location for future consumption experiences. It also distinguished this location within the geography of the park, coupling place with behavioral norms that subsequently channeled ongoing experiential customization.

5. Discussion

Existing research has promoted a conceptualization of value-creation in service experiences as practices operating across multiple domains of activity and highlighting the spatial dimensions of value-creation. In this conceptualization, consumers are crucial to enacting and realizing the value of an organization's experiential propositions (Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Lugosi, 2014). Researchers have also considered the various ways in which consumers may actively engage with service spaces to create unique experiences, although the emphasis has been on the servicescape as a distinct unit of analysis (e.g. Aubert-Gamet,

1997). The findings of this study expand these lines of inquiry by (re)conceptualizing customization to account more clearly for: a) the role of consumers in shaping customization in service experiences; and b) the socio-spatial and material dimensions of consumers' customization practices, particularly as they operate in relation to, but not exclusively in, the servicescape. More specifically, the data show how multiple spaces, in both the customer and joint (organization-consumer) spheres of activity (Grönroos and Voima, 2013), may be brought into customization processes.

The data from this study highlight that customization relies on interactive consumer practices of 'enrollment' (Latour, 2005) as they connect spaces and the activities associated with those spaces to particular experiential goals and outcomes. Enrollment involves embodied practices of consumption (i.e. the form of eating, drinking, dressing up, singing, walking, etc.). Enrollment also involved representational acts of naming, and valuation as spatial patterns of movement (e.g. in the crawls and rollercoaster challenges), sites (e.g. cupcake outlets, bridges) and activities (e.g. singing, cheering, sharing food) are assigned new values and meanings.

The present research revealed that consumers used physical and virtual interactions to re-construct the experiential space. This interactive customization followed a continuum; at one end were attempts to create unique experiences using existing organizational resources and practices in ways that correspond to the experiential goals and outcomes envisioned by the service providers. Designated 'cooperative co-production', this level of interaction reflects Chathoth *et al.*'s (2013) forms of customer participation activities that did not require creative processes or result in radical transformation of the servicescape or the fundamental service processes. Cooperative co-production included the re-sequencing of activities or services that were part of the provider's propositions, planning and decision-making regarding the spatial and temporal aspects of consumption and coordinating, mobilizing and enrolling other consumers to engage in consumption. This type of co-creation is more in line with most research in the area, which tends to place greater focus on the organization's activities and strategies (Kristensson *et al.*, 2008).

The second form of interaction, which was termed 'compatible co-creation', enrolled embodied practices, objects and technological resources in more disruptive or transformative ways, but which were compatible with the organization's objectives and enhanced existing experiential propositions. Some examples include the theme park scavenger hunt, dapper day, the cupcake crawl, and the carb overload prior to the running events. Bitner *et al.* (1997) proposed that services may be customized by consumers providing information, taking responsibility for choices, and carrying out practical activities. However, the data from this study shows that the socio-material practices may take more complex and creative forms. These practices may take place in consumers' virtual and physical spaces, away from the servicescape, and are driven by consumers seeking to actively customize their experiences. Notably, the acts of preparation (e.g. training for marathons, investing in costumes, planning hunts, designing and distributing technologies in the form of mobile applications, and mobilizing fellow consumers), all reflect constructively disruptive forms of enrollment through which customized experiences could be enacted and experiential value realized.

This study also identified a third type of co-created customization, 'subversive co-creation', which took place when members re-constructed spaces and utilized resources for practices that distorted or directly contrasted with the objectives of the organization. Examples of incidents where members would subvert space included the 'drunken insult bridge' and the theme park hotel bar crawl. Both of these activities had the potential to

contradict and therefore undermine the family-centric orientation of the theme park. In both instances, it is possible that TPF members detracted from the experience of other guests, such as families, which was the theme park's core target market and whose visit carried intentions more in line with the organization's vision.

Echeverri and Skålen (2011) described analogous subversive activities as 'value co-destruction', which occurs when the interaction between customers and providers is incongruent and not collaborative. Similarly, Lefebvre and Plé (2011) defined value co-destruction as "a relationship process between focal actors and their networks that results in a decline in at least one of the focal actors and/or their networks' well-being" (p. 10). Value can either be destroyed by the resources or the actors which are part of the process, and can either be intentional or unintentional (Chathoth *et al.*, 2013; Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010). The two important and overlapping characteristics of subversive co-creation and value destruction are: firstly, that the actions of one group of consumers may contradict and disrupt an organization's experiential propositions; and secondly, these disruptions pose potential risks to other consumers and the organization. There is a well-established body of work concerning deviant behavior in services, which conceptualizes such behavioral forms as undesirable because they negatively impact the organization's staff, processes, resources, and other customers (cf. Daunt and Harris, 2012; Fisk *et al.*, 2010; Harris and Reynolds, 2003). In identifying the notion of subversive co-creation, this study highlights that this form of customization may certainly contrast most strikingly from an organization's goals, but it need not always result in negative outcomes. Consumer practices involving the redefinition of experiences offered by the organization may contradict what Hunter (1985) called the 'social order', but become positive acts of innovation. Subversive co-creation for some consumers, at least, may certainly be an effective way to customize experiences. The challenge emerges when the interests of these consumers clash with those of other consumers, staff, shareholders or local communities, and customization presents reputational risks to the brand.

Beyond identifying and distinguishing between different modes of consumer-led customization, the data from this study suggest that it is important to consider the conditions necessary for the different modes to operate. There are a number of factors that shape the possibility for customization but do not necessarily determine the form it may take in practice: experiential complexity, governability, compatibility and the mobilization of collective resources for shared (social) goals. Figure 2 offers a contextualized, holistic view of these factors.

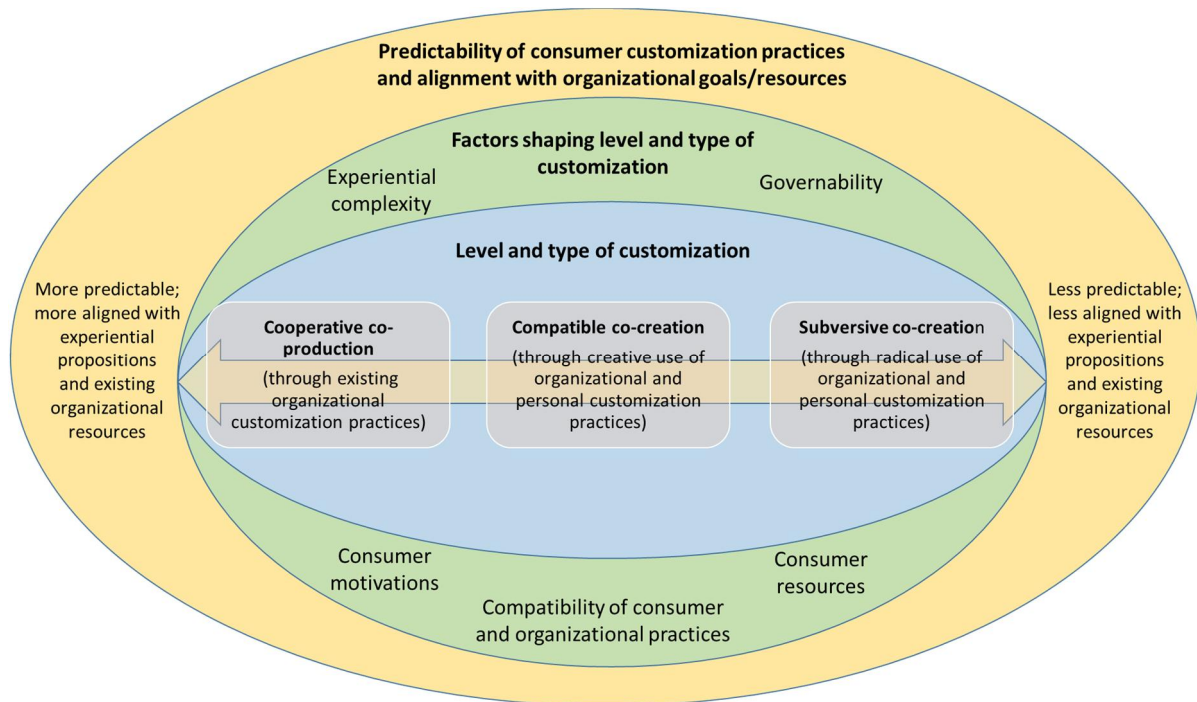


Figure 2. Contextual factors and potential outcomes of consumer-led customization

As the term suggests, experiential complexity refers to the number and diversity of elements making up the overall experiential proposition. Importantly, experiential complexity also has a spatial-temporal dimension, insofar as service experiences are enacted over an extended timeframe and larger or even multiple virtual and physical settings. The theme parks in the empirical case are made up of several, spatially-dispersed service components operating concurrently (i.e. food and beverage outlets, accommodation, transportation, attractions, rides, and entertainment activities). The sheer range and complexity of configurations provide opportunities for consumers to re-sequence activities, to re-inscribe values on service elements, and to transform aspects of service processes through their own practices.

Linked to experiential complexity, governability refers to the extent to which service providers can define, surveil, direct, and prohibit consumer practices. Within the confines of governable servicescapes, which reflect Grönroos and Voima's (2013) joint sphere of organization-customer interactions, organizations may be better able to predict, monitor and prescribe behavior through technology and control of the 'mechanic' (material, atmospheric) and 'humanic' (behavioral, performative) elements (cf. Berry *et al.*, 2002; Carbone and Haeckel, 1994; Hoffman and Turley, 2002). However, experiential complexity, and the increasing impact of consumer practices that operate through technologies and social spaces outside the organization's influence, shape the ability to anticipate and direct consumer customization. In this empirical example, the willingness and ability of TPF members to design new technologies (i.e. the scavenger hunt app), re-inscribe alternative meanings to service spaces, organize activities, and mobilize fellow members challenged governability and thus gave greater scope for experience customization. The organization may have been unaware of customization activities, especially if they did not noticeably contravene its goals and expectations. The complementarity of consumer and organizational practices also means that a service provider (or what may be more accurately called a 'service facilitator') may be aware

of customization activities but not prohibit them as long as they do not threaten the functioning of the operation or present risks to the brand.

This links to a further factor influencing modes of consumer-led customization: the compatibility of consumer and organizational goals, and of practices. In this empirical case, many of the activities complemented or built upon the experiential propositions and resources of the service provider. This complementarity shaped the types of customization activities and also incentivized consumers to engage in them. For example, the organization of the rollercoaster challenges, the various crawls or dressing-up activities of the “dapper day” events enhanced the experiential value of the existing services and attractions. Customization, in this case, created alternative forms of what Helkkula *et al.* (2012b) called ‘experiential value’ by introducing novel elements and new challenges, but also by reinforcing the social-relational aspect of consumption practices. In contrast, other service spaces may lend themselves to fewer enhancement activities in the form of complementary or even subversive customization activities partly because they have more limited scope to generate affective or relational value, or because the potential penalties for consumers outweigh the benefits.

Finally, linked to the previous point regarding experiential value, it is also important to acknowledge two further issues that have the potential to shape modes of customization: 1) consumer resources and 2) motivations, particularly regarding outcomes. Empirically, both the resources for and outcomes of customization had important social dimensions. Specifically, the ability to engage in increasingly complex customization practices was shaped by access to social, cultural, technological, and economic resources. The development and use of computing applications, the financing of visits and investment in practices, including costumes, foodstuffs and drinks, required access to economic capital and to forms of knowledge that may be considered cultural or subcultural capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1996). Furthermore, the enactment of value creation in or through customization practices drew upon the social capital of the TPF group; in other words, the networks of relationships and the collective assets and competencies of members (Bourdieu, 1984). TPF members thus mobilized interrelated forms of capital, across multiple times and spaces.

Significantly, the outcomes of customization were also fundamentally linked to the social nature of TPF. Customization practices served to articulate collective interest and identity in the realization of experiential value. The ability to construct novel, playful forms of experience drove innovation activities; for example, the creation of crawls and treasure hunts. However, participation in the trials and successes associated with customization, as demonstrated through the sharing of images and descriptions of events through social media, also offered ways to achieve status and belonging (Holbrook, 1996; 1999). Moreover, such performative acts enabled TPF members to enroll new virtual and physical spaces into their customization practices. It is also noteworthy to recognize that more mundane, functional types of mutual support amongst TPF members, such as giving advice on the practical aspects of visits and pricing, may reflect attempts to build what Putnam (2000) called ‘bonding capital’, reinforcing a sense of interdependence and collective self-interest.

6. Conclusion

This paper sought to challenge organization-centric approaches to customization by developing a consumer-centric conception and focusing on the socio-spatial aspects of their practices. It has been argued here that customization involves the transformation of an organization’s existing service propositions and resources, through multiple practices, ranging

from the re-sequencing of services, attractions or resources, the re-inscription of alternative meanings attached to consumption practices, and the creation of new uses or activities in existing service spaces. Furthermore, this paper proposed that some of the consumer activities complemented the existing goals and expectations of service providers, while others sought to challenge and transform them in more radical ways. Specifically, three modes of consumer-led customization were articulated based on the extent to which they enhanced or challenged existing practices: 1) cooperative co-production (non-disruptive consumer activities that modified aspects of the service space and processes in line with the organization's propositions); 2) compatible co-creation (creative activities that re-used organizational resources in novel ways that enhanced existing service propositions); and 3) subversive co-creation (radically transformative acts that challenged the organization's service and experiential propositions).

Subsequently, the factors influencing the adoption of particular modes of customization were discussed, namely: experiential complexity (the componential and spatial diversity of elements comprising the service experience); governability (the ability of organizations to monitor, predict, and orchestrate consumer practices); and compatibility (the congruence of consumer and organizational practices). Finally, this study also highlighted how the forms and outcomes of experiential value creation, enacted through customization, were linked to shared resources, communal goals, and notions of collective identity.

6.1 Implications for management

The development of a customer-centric approach to customization has a number of implications for management and research. First, from a services management perspective, the various forms of consumer-led customization identified here represent a series of risks and opportunities. It seems obvious that organizations would seek to encourage complementary co-production and co-creation practices and reduce the risks posed by disruptive ones. However, this study raises the question of how best to manage customization: reactively or proactively. More specifically, organizations may seek to monitor the practices of customization relating to their service propositions, spaces, and processes. This does, however, become an increasingly complex and resource-intensive exercise when value creation remains invisible (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010) and customization is enacted in virtual and physical spaces outside of the organization's domain and control (i.e. the consumer sphere). Dedicating human and technological resources to joining, or at least monitoring, the socio-spatial practices of groups, for example through covert observation or participative netnographic techniques on social media platforms, may offer practical insights into how consumers perceive existing service propositions and attempt to create alternative forms of experiential value through customization. However, the potential costs of extended human interactions may outweigh the perceived returns on investment and discourage organizations from engaging in such activities, choosing instead to monitor a narrower set of platforms such as TripAdvisor to gain insights into customer feedback on experiences.

It is important to recognize that consumer-led customization may be enacted within one-off, 'episodic' consumption events, by small groups, or more loosely affiliated networks of consumers or individuals. Customization may be less-patterned; it may be socially, spatially or temporally distributed, and therefore more difficult to identify and monitor. These contrast customization practices by distinct social entities, such as TPF, which have both critical mass and an ongoing presence in virtual and physical spaces. Nevertheless, organizations may attempt to generate insights from operational staff – detecting critical incidents to ascertain

behavioral types, as Echeverri and Skålén (2011) did. This could certainly be applicable in tourism and leisure contexts such as resorts, heritage sites and other visitor attractions where experience customization is possible (see Lamers and Pashkevich, 2018). Identifying types of behaviors and their contexts would enable them to be deployed in a computerized data scraping exercise from multiple web platforms to capture and explore further incidents of consumer customization. In sum, organizations may therefore continue to concentrate on monitoring their distinct servicescapes for evidence of constructive or disruptive customization. However, this may require the development of new forms of surveillance, requiring organizations to train frontline staff to observe for specific types of customization incidents, and the utilization of 'big' data mining technologies, to identify patterns of consumer-led customization practices.

Furthermore, investment may subsequently be focused on operational tactics to define and control consumers' behavior using marketing communications, alongside the strategic deployment of 'humanic' and 'mechanic' elements in managing the service encounter (Berry *et al.*, 2002). The objective of this is, in part, to encourage co-operative co-production and compatible co-creation. This could include, for example, incentivizing consumers to re-inscribe meaning in activities by communicating to them practices that introduce a competitive dimension with potentially status-enhancing benefits. Alternatively, consumers may be encouraged to re-sequence activities by stressing functional benefits such as reducing costs or waiting times. Management attempts to orchestrate customization may also focus on prohibiting subversive forms of customization. This may be achieved by further attempts to prescribe service process norms and clarifying punitive arrangements for transgressions; for example, engaging in public displays of deviant behavior. However, it is important to be mindful that not all forms of subversive customization may be wholly negative. Distinguishing between constructive and destructive forms will require the development of sensitive methods or cultures of evaluation in organizations that may subsequently allow certain forms of potentially subversive customization to operate.

Finally, organizations may seek to go further and take a more strategic, proactive approach to managing consumer-led customization; for example, developing incentives as part of loyalty schemes to mobilize customers to become brand advocates in driving constructive forms of customization and utilizing them as assets to monitor and prohibit subversive forms. This could involve motivating consumers through tangible rewards or status-based benefits for re-inscribing meaning associated with activities, as well enrollment behaviors that create value, or at least make 'invisible' value-creating activities apparent to organizations. There is a danger, however, that such attempts to induce behaviors through crude, material incentives alienates potentially loyal and creative consumers, particularly if the experiential value they associate with a service environment is seen to be co-opted or no longer serving their individual or collective goals.

6.2 Implications for theory and research

This paper responds to calls by Jaakkola *et al.* (2015) and others, who have challenged researchers to account for the spatial and temporal aspects of consumers' co-creation practices (cf. Ellway and Dean, 2016). Moreover, in adopting such an approach, this paper has helped to shed light on consumer practices that occur in 'joint' and 'consumer' spheres (Grönroos and Voima, 2013), which may often remain invisible (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010). The findings demonstrate how practices in consumers' private social-temporal domains transfer meanings, shape behaviors and guide perceptions in the servicescape over multiple visits.

Experience customization – or the use, transformation and potential abuse of organizational resources to construct unique experiences – has been conceptualized as taking place over time (cf. Helkkula *et al.*, 2012a) through multiple organizational ‘touchpoints’ (cf. Tynan *et al.*, 2014). In line with Helkkula *et al.*, (2012a), the forms and significance of customization have also been examined in relation to the social context. Significantly, the data suggests it is important to appreciate that interactions with the organization, through these touchpoints, operate at different spatial scales. Specifically, consumers customize their experiences by engaging with the service organization not as a singular, monolithic institution, but rather through interactions with smaller spatial components. In this empirical example this included, amongst other things, the different attractions and foodservice outlets. However, the practices and meanings associated with micro-level interactions shape consumers’ engagement with the macro entity (i.e. the park as a branded servicescape). There is opportunity to explore in future research how customization practices transfer across spatial scales, over time, to shape socially-constructed outcomes; for example, shared positive affect, status in a social network, individual and collective satisfaction, group loyalty and repeat visit.

Linked to the previous point regarding outcomes, the potential effects of experience customization practices identified here may be conceptualized through Holbrook’s (1996, 1999) framework and its eight fundamental types of customer value (Efficiency, Play, Excellence, Aesthetics, Status, Ethics, Spirituality, and Esteem). Beyond this empirical context, research could therefore examine which forms of value should be considered relevant for consumers and service operators in alternative consumption experience contexts. Future research can adapt and apply these forms of value in conjunction with existing models and frameworks, such as the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Model (cf. Eriksson *et al.*, 2018), which can facilitate the assessment and analysis of consumers’ pre- and post- expectations and behaviors.

In response to earlier calls (e.g. McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2012), this study has helped to identify what people actually do in practice. The analysis helped to identify a number of customization practices such as re-inscription of meaning attached to activities, the re-sequencing of activities, mobilization of people and other resources and the enrollment of material objects and technologies. The aim here was not to produce an exhaustive typology of customization behaviors. Nevertheless, future research can extend the current study in developing a more complete taxonomy (cf. Echeverri and Skålén, 2011).

The management challenges associated with the modes of customization identified here open several other areas for future research, while also raising new challenges. Specifically, the theme park is a complex socio-material-temporal service context, as well as a particular type of playful experiential environment. Therefore, although some parallels can be drawn between this and other service contexts, not all of the practices identified in this empirical case will be possible or applicable elsewhere. Therefore, this study and the approach to customization it developed should be seen as a call for future research that examines how these and other forms of customization practices operate in alternative types of service contexts.

Furthermore, the U.S.-based TPF represents a distinct consumer group, characterized by interdependence and interaction, which operates in a particular socio-cultural context. There is scope, therefore, to examine how alternative, but analogous, groups organized around different forms of experiential consumption and based in other cultural contexts engage in customization practices. However, a more fundamental challenge for future research will be to consider how these and related customization practices are enacted by

fragmented and discontinuous configurations of consumers, or by individuals. It is important to acknowledge that customization may operate not as ongoing practices but, instead, emerge situationally due to specific contextual factors.

This study has highlighted the importance of considering the socio-spatial elements, including material and temporal factors, in understanding consumer-centric customization. There is further potential to develop a better understanding of how the materiality of servicescapes and of consumer behaviors shapes customization or, vice versa, how material elements of consumption are entangled and mobilized in customization practices. This study also highlights the need to explore further how virtual and physical spaces are connected in and through co-created customization in particular moments and over extended periods of time.

Finally, this study also highlighted the need to examine how determining factors, including the experiential complexity and governability of the service space, and the compatibility of consumer and organizational practices, may determine where and how consumer-led customization operates. The ability to understand the organizational conditions that drive, enable or inhibit particular practices may offer the most effective ways for service providers to anticipate, orchestrate, or even mitigate the negative aspects of consumer-led customization.

Notes

I. <https://www.meetup.com/about/> (accessed 31 May 2017)

II. <http://blog.meetup.com/meetup-international/> (accessed 12 September 2017)

III. <https://www.meetup.com/help/topics/5/> (accessed 31 May 2017)

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