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Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience

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Abstract

Purpose – The interest in customer experience has increased at a phenomenal rate. However, research to capture the true meaning of the concept is limited. Therefore, this study aims to address the question of what are the underlying dimensions that constitute the construct of customer experience.

Design/methodology/approach – The netnography method is utilized to validate a priori concepts that have been identified in the literature within the tourist industry in Egypt.

Findings – The results identified eight dimensions; comfort, educational, hedonic, novelty, recognition, relational, safety and beauty, which are consistent with major studies on experience.

Research limitations/implications – The focus of the study was on customer reviews that were written in English and posted online. Therefore, care should be taken when interpreting these findings.

Practical implications – This study attempted to gain a meaningful degree of understanding of customer experience construct. The results suggest a number of implications for service, marketing and brand managers. The knowledge of customer experience and the challenge of creating great customer experience are of utmost importance. Many marketers acknowledge the importance of customer experience, but they have very little knowledge of what the components are of customer experience.

Originality/value – Netnography has not been widely used as a marketing research technique.

Keywords Customer experience, Experiential brands, Tourism industry, Netnography, Tourism management, Egypt

Paper type Research paper

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 Pine and Gilmore's (1999) book, *Experience Economy*, is the origin of this nascent phenomenon "customer experience", and the authors claimed that experiences are the new economic offerings. As a consequence of the emergence of the customer experience concept, contributions from scholars focusing on customer experience were made (Schmitt, 1999, 2003; Forlizzi and Ford, 2000; Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Smith and Wheeler, 2002; Milligan and Smith, 2002; Carù and Cova, 2003; LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Shaw and Ivens, 2002; Ponsonby-Mccabe and Boyle, 2006).

As a consequence, the interest in customer experience has increased at a phenomenal rate (Schembri, 2006; Schmitt, 1999, 2003; Forlizzi and Ford, 2000; Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Smith and Wheeler, 2002; Milligan and Smith, 2002; Carù and Cova, 2003; LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Shaw, 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 (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 tourist industry, because of the dramatic upsurge of interest in this concept from academics and practitioners alike. In other words, the research question this study is trying to answer is:

RQ1. What are the dimensions customer experience as a domain specific construct?

Literature review

Customers 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.

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, obtains goods and services for personal consumption (Page and Connell, 2006, p. 65). The 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 (Moutinho, 1987; Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999; Woodside *et al.*, 2000; Quan and Wang, 2004, pp. 297-8).

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).

The current study seeks to answer the question of what constitutes 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 treats it as consumer experience, but the latter regards 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, 2003). There is an agreement about the fundamental importance of motivations in the leisure and tourism literature (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981).

Many studies have addressed the issue of tourist motivations to better understand the choice of leisure destination (Moscardo *et al.*, 1996). 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 (Balogulu and Uysal, 1996). The push factors are considered to be socio-psychological motivations that encourage 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 a scenic beache, or to shopping and entertainment destinations. 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 the 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); the 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 the 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, Travel Career Ladder, and known as TCL, 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 a 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.
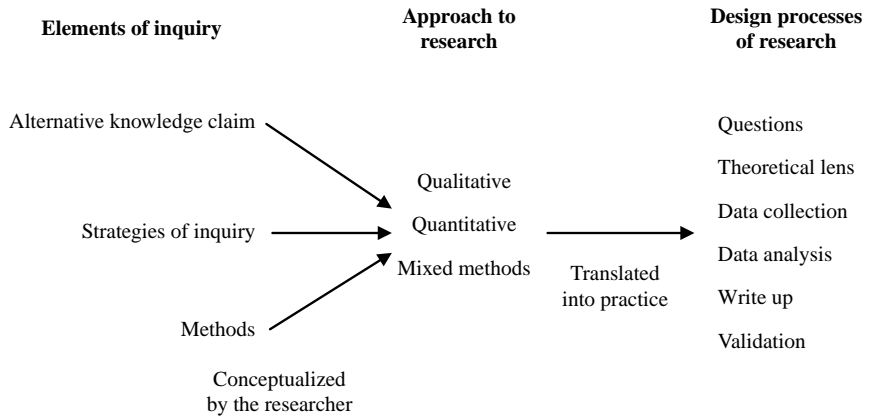
Methodology

The researchers initially started to highlight the nature of the research objectives in order to explain the concept and the dimension of customer experience from the consumer point of view. In general, researchers always approach the building and testing of theory from two approaches; that is, deductive and inductive. In a deductive approach, the researcher begins with an abstract, logical relationship among concepts, and then moves towards concrete empirical evidence (Neuman, 2003, p. 51). Meanwhile, in the inductive approach the researcher begins with detailed observations of the world and moves towards more abstract generalizations and ideas (Neuman, 2003, p. 51). In practice, most researchers use both approaches at various points of their studies. The current research therefore employs deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive approach implies that research is built on theories that already exist in the domain that is being researched (Bryman and Bell, 2007). An inductive approach will be employed because there is a possibility that important factors could have been identified in addition to those factors that have been derived from the existing literature.

Crotty (1998) suggested that in designing a research proposal, we should consider four questions:

RQ2. What epistemology (theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective) informs the research, e.g. objectivism, subjectivism, etc.?

RQ3. What theoretical perspective (philosophical stance) lies behind the methodology in question, e.g. positivism and post-positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, etc.?

RQ4. What methodology (strategy or plan of action that links methods to outcomes) governs our choice and use of methods, e.g. experimental research, survey research, ethnography, etc.?

RQ5. What methods (techniques and procedures) do we propose to use, e.g. questionnaire, interview, focus group, etc.?

Based on the Crotty's model, Creswell (2003) addressed three elements of inquiry (i.e. knowledge claim, strategies of inquiry and methods) pertaining to the design of the research. With respect to the current study, the researcher will follow the Creswell model in order to illustrate the research design. Figure 1 shows how these elements merge

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Figure 1.
Knowledge claims,
strategies of inquiry,
methods leading to
approaches and the
design process

Elements of inquiry	Approach to research	Design processes of research

Alternative knowledge claim

Qualitative

Questions

Theoretical lens

Strategies of inquiry — Quantitative

Data collection

Mixed methods

Data analysis

Translated into practice

Write up

Methods

Validation

Conceptualized
by the researcher

Source: Adapted from Creswell (2003, p. 5)

together to outline the approach of the research and in turn, translate into processes in the design of the research.

According to Creswell (2003) the first step to design a research project is to evaluate the knowledge claims brought to the study:

> Knowledge claim means that researchers start a project with certain assumptions about how they will learn and what they will learn during their enquiry. These claims might be called paradigms (Lincoln and Guba, 2000; Mertens, 1998); philosophical assumptions, epistemologies, and ontologies (Crotty, 1998); or broadly conceived research methodologies (Neuman, 2000). Philosophically, researchers make claims about what is knowledge (ontology), how we know it (epistemology), what values go into it (axiology), how we write about it (rhetoric), and the process for studying it (methodology) (Creswell, 1994, 2003, p. 6).

There are four sets of assumptions concerning the knowledge claims; post-positivism, constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism (Creswell, 2003). However, most ongoing social research is based on two major approaches, positivism and interpretivism. Positivism is the oldest and most widely used approach. It is broadly defined as the approach of natural sciences. In contrast to positivism, interpretive researchers see that the goal of social research is to develop an understanding of social life and discover how people construct meaning in natural settings (Neuman, 2003). They argue that ordinary people use common sense to guide them in daily living. Therefore, one must first grasp common sense (Neuman, 2003). The current study employs the qualitative approach to understand the problem because it is more suitable when there is a need for unfolding what surrounds a phenomenon (Carson *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, the study uses the netnography research method (which is explained in greater detail in the next section), and the merit of the netnography research method is the fact that it excels at telling the story, understanding complex social phenomena and assists the researcher in developing themes from the respondents' points of view (Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002).

Rational for the context
In order to conduct a study that examines customer experience, experiential brands were employed because they focus on consumer interaction with a company's product or

services (Dea *et al.*, 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 this sector (Franzen, 1999) and usually firms are attempting to strengthen those relations with their consumers (Randall, 1997). Luxurious resort-hotel brands in Egypt, particularly in Sharm el Sheikh, were chosen as a context for this study because these hotels provide a vast array of opportunities for customer interaction that provoke emotions and determine customers' feelings towards the services being offered (MacMillan and McGrath, 1997). Moreover, hotels provide the right atmosphere for customer engagement at every touchpoint.

Resort-hotels in Egypt, particularly in Sharm el Sheikh, were considered appropriate for this research because Egypt has been a tourist hub for many years, and continues this tradition today. Recently, Egypt has embarked upon comprehensive and diversified tourism, whereby tourists can find several kinds of tourism attractions. But, how are those hotel brands currently living up to the challenge of creating a great customer experience? This study seeks to answer this question.

Netnography
Experience is something singular that happens to an individual and which researchers cannot directly access (Carù and Cova, 2008). Therefore, researchers only interpret what their subjects have expressed orally, in writing or through their behaviour. Experience has become more and more important to marketing, but 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-Elliot, 2003). Instead, verbatims are argued to be important to understanding the private nature of the experience to be studied (Carù 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 (Carù 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, 2002) is one of the leading researchers who used netnography in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour. He has defined netnography as a process or research methodology, and as 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).

It is argued that netnography is the best 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). With traditional methods, the presence of the researcher affects and interrupts the natural, normal practices of everyday life (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In general, traditional ethnographic methods include:

- gaining "entrée" into the culture or group one wants to investigate;
- gathering and analysing data;

- ensuring trustworthiness of data interpretation;
- conducting ethical research; and
- member checking, or getting feedback from participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Kozinets, 2002).

Kozinets (2002) provides strategies 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. Groups which have certain criteria are preferred, and these criteria are:

(1) a more focused and more research questions, 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 and is 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-Elliot, 2003). The researcher intensively reviewed the most prominent web sites offering online consumer reviews about their experiences, both positive and negative, with hotels in Sharm el Sheikh taking into consideration the criteria recommended by Kozinets (2002). The search for the convenient web sites for this study was conducted on Google using combinations of the following keywords: "Sharm el Sheikh", "Hotels", "Customer experience". As a result, two web sites were found to be more relevant to this study (www.holidaywatchdog.com; www.tripadvisor.com).

Data collection
The second step of Kozinets' (2000) framework involves data collection. In this study, direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members will be adopted. Certain aspects were considered when selecting the customer messages; for example:

- The text which is experiential in nature and contains a full description of the experience.
- Overwhelming amounts of data are anticipated, and so all messages will be examined, disqualified reviews and any irrelevant messages will be discarded.
- An attempt will be made to find diverse (both positive and negative) journal postings of customer experiences with the intention of sampling strategy, not with a view of offering representativeness or transferability, but in order to focus on analytic depth of the topic see Brown *et al.* (2003).

The selection process resulted in 85 reviews (Table I and Figure 2). Although international in scope, postings on these web sites primarily occurred in English. Kozinets (2002, p. 64) stated that "the uniquely mutable, dynamic, and multiple online landscape mediates social

Resort name	Number of customer reviews
www.tripadvisor.com	
Four Seasons	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 Kirosiez	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 Oyoun 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

Table I.
The number
of the examined
customer reviews

Figure 2.
Customers' reviews
selection process
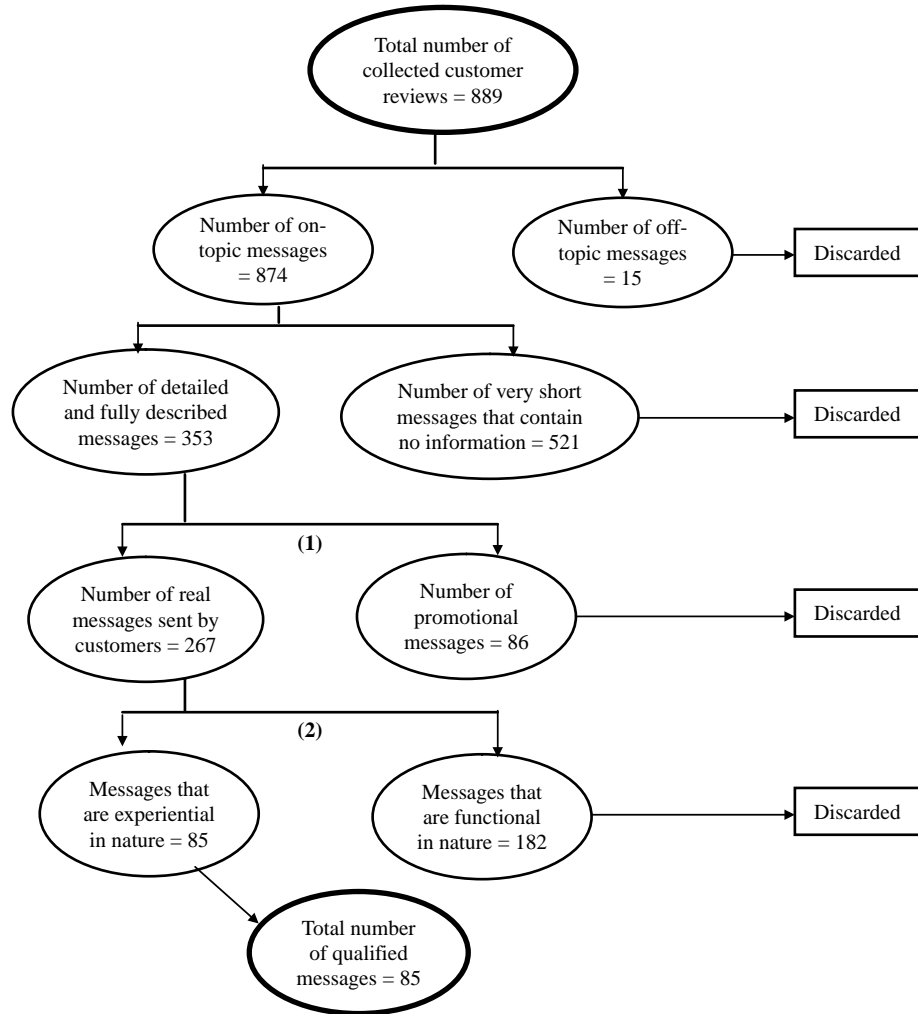
Notes: (1) Promotional messages are believed to be sent by the company to promote the hotel among the online community members; (2) the functional messages are those primarily concerned with the evaluations of different services provided by the resort without mentioning any kind of emotions provoked or telling any stories about the experience

representation and renders problematic the issue of informant identity". In online contexts, participants might be more likely to present an identity that is significantly different to their "real" identities, which could possibly undermine the trustworthiness of the data collected. In addition, in online communities, the 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.

Analysis and interpretation

Once messages that are directly related to the investigator's research questions were identified, a data analysis using constant comparative method was performed 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 by following the principles for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data as recommended by Spiggle (1994), Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Arnould and Wallendorf (1994). Relevant themes to research hypotheses were identified and then the emergent themes were compared with preconceptions derived from the literature.

Research ethics

Haggerty (2004, p. 405) 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". 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. Langer and Beckman (2005) develop an argument for conducting covert netnographic studies – where participants were not informed of the researchers' presence, nor their consent sought – for the 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 researchers recognize the sensitivity of the topic, but drawing on the successful outcome of the Langer and Beckman (2005), and the increasing "normalisation" of e-communication since Kozinets developed the methodology, they asserted that web sites utilized in the current study are established as public forums of communication and that consent has become unnecessary for the analysis of public postings.

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). Having conducted the current study entirely unobtrusively, the 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 already identified on the basis of the literature. Coding of the narratives utilized both the start list of codes based on the constructs identified in the literature and similarly an open codes process. Initially, a start list of codes was created which was based on the range of constructs generated from the literature review. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 58) 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". 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). Similarly, the coder reliability was tested with the assistance of an independent researcher (familiar with the topic) to give feedback on the categories identified. Overall, an agreement was found in the identification of the themes and consistency of allocation. Simple agreement is used in the present study; it is one of the most popular coefficients used to test the reliability of the coding. The simple agreement is a simple percentage, representing the number of agreements divided by the total number of measures (Neundorf, 2002). A conceptual formula for percent agreement could be written as follow: $PA_0 = A/n$, where PA_0 stands for "proportion agreement observed", A is the number of agreements between two coders, and n is the total number of unites the two coders have coded for the test (also, the maximum agreement they could achieve). This statistic ranges from 0.00 (no agreement) to 1.00 (perfect agreement), 94 per cent agreement is achieved in the current study which is close to perfect agreement.

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. This study uncovered those dimensions; comfort, educational, hedonic, novelty, recognition, relational, safety and beauty, which are consistent with the findings of Otto and Ritchie (1996) and major studies on experience (Holbrook and Hirchman, 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).

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 to by online customers who visited Sharm el Sheikh hotels and who sent their reviews to the web site. This study supports the a priori dimensions generated from prior research findings.

Comfort

Older customers, in particular, stressed the importance of comfort as a customer experience. The qualitative study's findings indicated that the customers' decision on their holiday destination was closely wedded to their desire for relaxation. Additionally, the textual analysis of the customer reviews revealed a focus on the 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. We enjoyed one of the most relaxing and enjoyable holidays to date.

The findings are consistent with Crompton (1979), Shoemaker (1989) and Otto and Ritchie (1996). 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 the following message:

> 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.

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 its voluntary nature when learners themselves have a real choice regarding what, where, when, how, and with whom they learn, and it is stimulated by the needs and interests of the learner (Packer, 2006). Online community members referenced many educational experiences, such as the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) open water diver course. 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!

Some resorts deliberately cater to their customers' entertainment motives, while attempting to maintain the education element as a secondary purpose. However, today's customers take for granted the educational experience. A study conducted by Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter (2001), on the benefits sought by university educated women who travel for pleasure, concluded that, they travel "to experience natural surroundings" (mean = 3.58), and "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 children of school age. A customer commented:

> 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.

As the findings indicated, there is strong evidence to suggest that the educational experiences which customers seek are provided through hospitality establishments. However, those establishments should be cautious in just providing educational experiences at the expense of entertainment, bearing in mind that the primary motivation of a customer visiting the place is to have fun and not to learn. However, customers want to engage in an experience of learning because they value and enjoy the process of learning itself, rather than the learning outcomes or knowledge gained (Packer, 2006). This educational element of experience is consistent with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) point of view and Otto and Ritchie's (1996) dimensions of service experience. The findings showed that the customer is experiencing "free-choice learning" as suggested by Packer (2006) of diving, snorkelling, quad biking, star gazing, etc. This experience is autotelic, which means "having itself as its only purpose" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and is characterized by a mixture of discovery, exploration, mental stimulation and excitement (Packer, 2006).

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Hedonic

Findings illustrated that hedonic is central to the customer experience in a hospitality and tourism context. The hedonic dimension incorporates excitement, enjoyment and memorability (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). Customer reviews emphasized the importance of this dimension of experience. Hedonic aspects of the consumption experience ties into the intangibility of the services provided in the hotel context such as adventure vacation, a memorable meal or the surroundings of a plush hotel (Titz, 2008).

First, the feeling of excitement is an important emotion frequently referenced by many members in their discussions. The most exciting parts of their stay were the Bedouin, experience and snorkelling. Exciting moments were described by a customer in the following story:

> 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".

Second, the findings also showed that amusement was delivered to the consumers in two ways: passive entertainment and active entertainment. Passive entertainment means that customers are required to arrange for the delivery of entertainment it includes an enormous variety of activities such as watching the Italian show, as recounted by a customer:

> 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.

On the other hand, and in contrast to passive entertainment, is active entertainment, whereby customers participate in the activity to derive amusement. But sometimes participation in active entertainment requires a certain level of skill and knowledge to ensure entertainment. This is known as 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 the "animation" department, which is in charge of sports co-ordination and cultural entertainment for children and adults. It is 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, creating a good mood, and offering suggestion and possibilities for an active life style (Jacovlev, 1992).

Third, experience gained has some degree of memorability (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) as mentioned by customers. Within certain narratives, customers said that they may occasionally try something that unexpectedly achieves a joyful and memorable experience, as the following examples highlight: "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". Furthermore, in some of the observations of the texts some interesting reflections on 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.

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, p. 88), 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.

Novelty
Comments about the uniqueness and individuality of the natural setting or the different excursions provided were seen as an indication of the novelty dimension. Customer posts indicated they sought novelty as an experiential need. Conceptually, the term novelty implies newness or uniqueness. The need for novelty refers to the desire to go from a known to an unknown place, or to discover a new experience, thrill, and adventure (Lee and Crompton, 1992). Their study identified four dimensions of the 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. Customers reflected on the perception of the newness and uniqueness of the experience. For example, these 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.

These examples consistently demonstrate that customers were provided a form of change that enabled them to experience something different. Findings from the netnographic study also showed that novelty-seeking customers' experiences are characterized by thrill or adventure, 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 [. . .]. 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.

Finally, prior works have suggested that surprise or unexpectedness 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 customers' feeling of importance (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). From customer comments, it is obvious that staff exhibited certain types of behaviour which made them feel important, which is exhibited in comments such as, "Everything is 'with pleasure madam', 'My daughter was treated like a princess'". It was also noted that customers felt comfortable with the staff because the staff were always happy to see them, always had a smile on their faces, warmly greeted guests, and called them by their name. This was illustrated in the following comment:

> 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, so that they could feel important and confident that they were being taken seriously.

Safety
In this study, Sharm el Sheikh as a destination was perceived as a relatively safe region. This was 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 participate in any activities.

In the first half of the 1990s, Egypt as an international destination has witnessed fewer terrorist incidents, whereby terrorist groups tried to destabilize the economy

and to gain much needed media attention to achieve their ideological objectives (Hall and O'Sullivan, 1996). As a consequence, Egypt gained a reputation for being an unsafe place to 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!!.

According to Prideaux (1996) resorts that offer a "hedonistic" lifestyle have higher crime rates because of factors such as frustrated poorly paid seasonal workers and a drug sub-culture, 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 showed an absence of those behaviours, and many references that were made related how safe they felt. Some particularly striking examples of this 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 20 min to walk around completely and of an evening walk along was very lovely and you are completely safe as there are other hotels along side you as well as security walking about all the time.

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). A sense of beauty has been recognized as an important human capacity and that the subjective experience of beauty is characterized by a sublime and exalted state that is unique, psychologically significant and desirable (Hagman, 2002). With the sense of beauty there is a feeling of wholeness, pleasure, a lessening of anxiety, awe, joy, excitement, optimism and contentment (Hagman, 2002). The display of the beauty may be created by humans, 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.

Similarly, the displays of beauty may be natural, as found in waterfalls, gardens coral reefs, or observing coloured fish for their natural beauty. It is obvious, from the following posts that a sense of beauty is linked to the evocation of a pleasurable experience:

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.

Relational
The netnography research captured another important component of customer experience which is the relational experience that involves the person and the consumption or use of a product with other people (Gentile *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, tourism provides an outlet for youth to experience sexuality and relationships (Page and Connell, 2006). Relational experience was 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 relationship. 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.

Conclusion
This qualitative study has been conducted to validate the a priori conceptual framework and identify the additional relevant constructs that might not be identified in the literature. Also, the qualitative study aimed to gather more in-depth information to advance the understanding of the customer experience dimensions. 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 Schwager, 2007; Gentil *et al.*, 2007). Insufficient empirical research has been done on experience consumption from the consumer perspective. Therefore, this study attempted to gain a 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 the definition of what is customer experience, which is a poorly defined concept (Carù and Cova, 2003) and what constitutes customer experience? A theoretical contribution of this study is the netnography method (Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002) which is 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, and only a few 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 tourism context from the customer's perspective. 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 experiences are of utmost importance. Many marketers acknowledge the importance of customer experience, but they have very little knowledge of the components of customer experience in the hotel context.

The researchers 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 were written in English. The study did not consider those customers who have not posted their reviews online. The results could be different if the study examined the experiences of both the online and the offline tourist communities. Therefore, care should be given when 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 was the first study on the topic of customer experience in Egypt. Given the increasing attention to customer experience in recent years, 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 the hospitality industry.

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