

**A NETNOGRAPHY STUDY ON BRANDED CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE:  
EVIDENCE FROM THE RED SEA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study addresses the question of what are the underlying dimensions and messages to self and others that constitute the construct of customer experience. The study uses a netnography method to validate or refute and extend a priori concepts that the literature identifies within the context of resort-hotel brands in a Sharm El Sheikh resort in Egypt. The results identify eight dimensions (comfort, educational, hedonic, novelty, recognition, relational, safety and sense of beauty) and unique configurations of these eight dimensions that extend prior research on customer experience.

**Key words:** Customer experience, experiential service brand, netnography, message

## **INTRODUCTION**

In today's global marketplace firms face the challenge of creating an outstanding customer experience to drive brand awareness, secure customer loyalty, and ultimately increase profits. Customer experience is the internal and subjective response that customers have of direct or indirect contacts with a firm or other brand identity (e.g., England, Madonna, Tiger Woods, and California). Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service; customers frequently initiate direct contact. 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).

Pine and Gilmore (1999) claim that experiences are the new economic offerings. As a consequence of research on interpreting customer experience, researchers are now developing core tenants of theory useful for deepening understanding of the phenomena (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Carù and Cova, 2003; Forlizzi, and Ford, 2000; LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Milligan and Smith, 2002; Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle, 2006; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt, 2003; Shaw and Ivens, 2002; Smith and Wheeler, 2002). Customer experience is an essential ingredient of the economy. Therefore, this study addresses the re-emergence of experience and its importance.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many service executives strive to develop long term relationships with their customers and provide good service to delight their customers with the ultimate goal of sustaining brand loyalty. Unfortunately, in this new market place good service also is no longer sufficient as an effective differentiator for companies to remain competitive (Berry et al., 2002; MacMillan and McGrath, 1997; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Schembri, 2006).

Reicheld (1996) suggests that up to sixty five percent of satisfied customers leave their current service providers and switch to competitors. Because it is less a question of

satisfaction with the brand but one of pleasure lived during the immersion (Carù and Cova, 2007) into the service platform (Arvidsson, 2005, 2006). This void leaves managers and researchers alike with insufficient information to answer the question of what truly drive brand loyalty. In an effort to answer this question, it is claimed that customer experience affects loyalty behaviours (Barsky and Nash, 2002; Berry et al., 2002). Academics and practitioners have recognized that merely satisfying customers is not enough, and that going beyond customer satisfaction to “customer delight” is required (Schlossberg, 1990).

Although experience economy emerges in the business-to-business field, the focus widens to tourism research because tourism is one of the primary industries of the experience economy (Quan and Wang, 2004) and tourist experience is an established area of studies since the 1970s (Cohen, 1979, 1988; Dann, 1977; Lee and Crompton, 1992; MacCannell, 1973, 1976; McCabe, 2002; Mitchell, 1983; Neumann, 1992; Ryan, 1997; Wang, 1999, 2002).

A consumer is an individual who, through a process of decision-making, obtain goods and services for personal consumption (Page and Connell, 2006, p.65). Tourist is a consumer “Indeed, from a destination marketer’s or the tourism industry’s perspective, the tourist is a consumer, and the economic and marketing significance of the tourist activity lies in its consumption and spending. Even the experiences of attractions that are in contrast to the daily experience, are itself a part of total consumption of tourism product. Thus, in the marketing/management literature, the tourist experience is all about consumer experiences...” (Quan and Wang, 2004: 297-298). In tourism, however, the tourist becomes a consumer of place and culture as well as a purchaser of a tourism product. Therefore, recognizing the importance of experiencing a place is necessary for advancing customer-experience theory (Page and Connell, 2006; Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008).

While the current study seek to answer the question of what constitute customer experience. Similarly, the issue of what are the components that constitute the tourist experience remains puzzling (Quan and Wang, 2004). The social science approach is

different from the marketing and management approach in discovering the meaning of tourist experience. The former is treating it as consumer experience, but the latter regarding it as peak experience (Quan and Wang, 2004). Furthermore, both of the approaches capture some of the salient aspects of tourist experience (Quan and Wang, 2004).

## **METHOD**

Qualitative research is more suitable when the need is great for unfolding what surrounds a phenomenon (Carson et al., 2001). Considerable number of studies used qualitative methods to gain insights into the phenomena being investigated (e.g., Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi, Rose, & Leigh 1993; Thompson, 1997).

### **Rational for the context**

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

Resort-hotels in Egypt particularly in Sharm El Sheikh is adequate for this research because Egypt has remained traditionally the hub of tourists for many years and recently, Egypt has embarked into comprehensive and diversified tourism, whereby tourists can find several kinds of tourism such as: monuments, marinas, recreation, religious purposes and

desert safaris that satisfies different ambitions of tourists and which are widely needed nowadays such as therapeutic, conferences, exhibitions, environment and sports. But, how are those hotel brands currently living up to the challenge of creating great customer experience? This study is seeking to answer this question.

### **Netnography**

Experience is something singular that happens to an individual and researchers can not directly access (Caru and Cova, 2008). Therefore researchers only interpret what their subjects have expressed orally, in writing or through their behaviour. Experience becomes more and more important to marketing, however, the methodologies typically used to research experiences, such as interviews and focus groups, have a number of drawbacks such as respondent inhibition (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Verbatim comments instead are important for understanding the private nature of the experience to be studied (Caru and Cova, 2008).

The ethnography of consumption has, in just a few years, become a major qualitative research strategy, given the limitations of questionnaire-driven verbatim comments and other kinds of interviews (Mariampolski, 1999, 2005) for understanding the deep feelings and emotions lived by consumers (Caru and Cova, 2008). Ethnography has been used to cover such experiences since the shift from a researcher-devised retrospective narrative in an interview form to an introspective narrative that is produced, fine-tuned and diffused by the consumer in the shape of a text diary, audio diary or video diary (Caru and Cova, 2008). This decentred practice, which turns consumers into active producers of their experiences' narratives, is rooted in the rise of so-called "self-reflexive" individuals (Caru and Cova, 2008). Individuals' reflexivity is what enables them to tell their stories and to explain their actions using words. This is extremely useful in helping researchers to understand the hedonic and subjective dimension of the consumption experience, rather than the functional and objective dimension of a product/service's utilisation (Caru and Cova, 2008).

Netnography as a marketing research method uses publicly available information to “identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic research methods are able to develop “a ‘thick description’ of the lived experience of consumers” Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003, p. 215). Netnographic studies seem to be able to offer those “thick descriptions” of the life worlds of consumers.

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

### **Entrée**

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

A netnography in the form of non-participant observation is used in this particular study based on customer reviews published on the internet that contained detailed information about their experiences in Sharm El Sheikh Hotels. The reason for choosing the non-participant observation is the undesirable influence of the outsider to the group (Elliott

and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). The researcher intensively reviewed the most prominent websites that offer online consumer reviews about their experiences either positive or negative with hotels in Sharm El Sheikh taking into consideration the criteria recommended by Kozinets (2002). The search for the convenient websites for this study was conducted on Google using combinations of the following keywords: “Sharm el sheikh”, “Hotels”, “Customer experience”. As a result, four websites were found to be more relevant to this study; [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com), [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com).

### ***Data collection***

The second step of Kozinets’s framework involves data collection. Kozinets (2002) stated that there are two types of data collected when conducting a netnography; First, the written communications occurring between and among participants in the online setting (which, for analysis, are typically copied and pasted into word processor documents on the researcher’s computer) or downloaded. Second, the researcher’s self-authored field notes, in which he or she describes, reflects upon, and analyses what he or she is observing during the research process. This study uses direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members.

Some aspects were considered when choosing the customer messages. Firstly, the text which is experiential in nature and contains fully description of the experience are selected; Secondly, overwhelming amounts of data are anticipated, therefore, all messages are examined and disqualified reviews and any irrelevant messages will be discarded; Thirdly, an attempt will be made to find diverse (both positive and negative) journal postings of their experiences with the intention of sampling strategy not to offer representativeness or transferability, but to focus on analytic depth of the topic (See Brown et al., 2003).

Table 1 about here.



The selection process resulted in 85 qualified reviews (see Table 1 and Figure 1). The collected messages were posted between August 2007 and August 2008. Although international in scope, postings on these websites primarily occurred in English. Researcher accessed those customer reviews websites from the first of September 2008, to the mid of December 2008 to secure a sufficient volume of reviews about a predetermined sample of resort-hotel brands in Sharm El Sheikh.

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

Figure 1 about here.

### **Analysis and interpretation**

Once messages that are directly related to the investigator’s research questions are identified, a data analysis approach similar to grounded theory or the constant comparative method (Glaser and Straus, 1967; Straus and Corbin, 1990) are conducted, with the help of a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software such as Nvivo (Kozinets, 2002). This study analyzed the informants’ experiences from the journal entries through following the

principles for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data as recommended by (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Spiggle, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Relevant themes to research hypotheses have been identified and then the emergent themes were compared with preconceptions derived from the literature.

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

### **Research ethics**

As in any form of research, netnographers must address the issue of ethics, Kozinets (2002, p. 65) describes two major ethical issues surrounding online research, including netnography: “Are online forums to be considered a private or a public site?” “What constitutes ‘informed consent ‘in cyberspace?’” Kozinets (2002) notes that no clear consensus on the public or private nature of message boards has yet to emerge and that the requirement for consent remains unclear. For confidentiality and privacy purposes, Kozinets (2002) urging researchers to“(1) fully disclose his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members during any research; (2) ensure confidentiality and anonymity of informants; and (3) seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched; (4) to take a cautious position on the private-versus-public medium issue. This procedure requires the researcher to contact community members and to obtain their permission (inform consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research” (Kozinets, 2002:. 65; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998).

However, Haggerty (2004) stated that these ethical issues remain unresolved among qualitative researchers conducting research online, explaining that some researchers view online data as “public pronouncements, comparable to letters to the editor, and as such amenable to academic analysis without the necessity of ethical review” (p. 405). Therefore, ethical guidelines for the study of online communication recommended by Kozinets should be revised. These guidelines make sense in restricted (semi-) private online communication and when taking departure in traditional ethnography.

Langer and Beckman (2005) develop an argument for conducting covert netnographic studies – which participants were not informed of the researchers’ presence or seeking consent - for sensitive topic of cosmetic surgery, by arguing that revealing themselves as researchers would have potentially endangered the research project if participants had opposed the research. They also argue that the message boards are open to researchers because they are ‘public communication media’ (Langer and Beckman, 2005: 197). The researcher is not claiming that his topic is a sensitive one, but drawing on the successful outcome of the Langer and Beckman study (2005), and the increasing ‘normalisation’ of e-communication since Kozinets developed the methodology, the researcher asserted that website utilized in the current study are established as public forums of communication and that consent has become unnecessary for analysis of public postings. It stands to a reason that asynchronous chat on the internet often using a pseudonym, where people can post relatively anonymous messages. Only, registered users have the option to present information about themselves, such as gender, age, occupation and geographical location and this information may or may not be accurate.

### ***Member checks***

Finally, in traditional qualitative research, “member checking” is the process of presenting research findings back to research participants, in order to solicit their comments on the researchers’ interpretations of data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Kozinets (2002) argues

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

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

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

were formed in the process. Also memos were documented to note particular insights and ideas regarding the data analysis.

The coding process involved three phases: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The open coding phase (Miles and Huberman, 1984; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) focus on linking the qualitative data to the research issues identified from the literature. Therefore, the open coding process reviewed the texts line by line and made note of issues that related to the start list of codes and created new codes as the understanding of the data proceeded. The focus of open coding approach is to find patterns in the texts, which are relevant to the literature. Initial open coding also focused on identifying codes that already known before coding process because they were informed by the literature. During the second step, which is known as axial coding phase, the texts were analyzed to compare and contrast between themes which enable identification of patterns within the texts. Selective coding at the end “involves moving to a higher level of abstraction with the developed paradigmatic constructs, specifying relationships, and delineating a core category or construct around which the other categories and constructs revolve and that relates them to one another” (Spiggle, S., 1994, p. 495)

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

Content analysis or analyzing the content of the reviews is the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data (Patton, 1990). "The qualitative

analyst's effort at uncovering patterns, themes, and categories is a creative process that requires making carefully considered judgments about what is really significant and meaningful in the data” (Patton, 1990, p. 406). The categories labelled with particular reference to concepts from customer experience literature based on a prior research driven code development approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This allows for consistency of terminology and consistency with the prior work. To determine the reliability of the coding through content analysis, stability was ascertained when the content was coded more than once by the researcher (Weber, 1985).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

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

### **Support for A priori dimensions**

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

## Comfort

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

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

We went to the health spa for the Cleopatra package which was £35.00 and included a full body massage, a facial and face mask with cucumber, a body scrub, body wrap, sauna steam room and Jacuzzi which is amazing value and was very relaxing, I would definitely recommend. (Miss S Cottee, Sunrise Island View hotel review, posted October 2007, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

## **Educational**

A major theme emerging among customers is the educational dimension. Educational experience or “Learning for fun” as termed by (Packer, 2006) encompasses a mixture of discovery, exploration, mental stimulation and excitement (Packer, 2006). It is also characterized by the learning is voluntary when learners themselves have a real choice regarding what, where, when, how, and with whom they learn and stimulated by the needs and interests of the learner (Packer, 2006).

Online community’s members made references about many educational experiences they had. For instance, the PADI open water diver course, (PADI) the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) is the world’s largest recreational diving membership and diver training organization founded in 1966 by John Cronin and Ralph Erickson. PADI members, including dive centers, resorts, educational facilities, instructors, and dive masters, teach the majority of the world’s recreational divers. As one member recounted:

I have just returned from Sharm El-Sheikh, where I completed my open water PADI together with my 2 sons, aged 10 and 12y. We had 2 fantastic days. We had a really good instructor, very professional, funny and great with kids. We all thought he was excellent, and we all passed! The aquatic life we saw was amazing too! ([A female customer, Cameldive Club and Hotel review, posted September 2008, [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com))

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



enjoyable for all types of customers and highly educational especially for the children at the school age, this is what was mentioned by a customer:

The pier takes you right to the best snorkelling/diving experience in the world! There is no need to achieve that via a water craft just jump right in and put your face in the warm clear water where colourful and amazing sea life greets you. I enrolled my 8 year old daughter in a free snorkelling class and in one hour, she was doing her own snorkelling. (Ms Mj Pope, Jaz Mirabel Beach Resort hotel review, posted June 2007, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

Strong evidence indicates that educational experience customers seek is provided through the hospitality establishments. However, those establishments should be cautious in providing solely educational experiences and neglect of entertainment, whereby the primary motivation of customer visiting the place is to have fun not to learn something. However, they want to engage in an experience of learning because they value and enjoy the process of learning itself, rather than learning outcomes or knowledge gained (Packer, 2006). This educational element of experience is consistent with Pine and Gilmore (1999) point of view and Otto and Ritchie (1995) dimensions of service experience. The findings showed that the customer experiencing “free-choice learning” as suggested by Packer (2006) of diving, snorkelling, quad biking, star gazing. This experience is auto telic, that is, “having itself as its only purpose” Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and is characterized by a mixture of discovery, exploration, mental stimulation and excitement (Packer, 2006).

### **Hedonic**

The findings illustrate that hedonic is central to customer experience in the hospitality and tourism context. Hedonic dimension incorporates excitement, enjoyment and memorability (Otto and Ritchie, 1995). Customer reviews emphasized the importance of this

dimension of experience. Hedonic aspects of the consumption experiences ties into the intangibility of the services provided in the hotel context such as adventure vacation, a memorable meal or the surrounding of a plush hotel (Titz, 2008). Firstly, feeling of excitement is an important aspect that many members frequently referenced in their discussion; the most exciting parts of their experience were Bedouin experience and snorkeling. Moments of excitement occurred was described by customers in the following two stories:

The Bedouin experience is another excursion we went on, it was great, we rode on camels and watched the sunset also did some stargazing - you look through a telescope and get to see the moon and Jupiter, and another flashing star, 'can't remember the name of it. (Miss K Coombs, Conrad Sharm El Sheikh Resort Reviews, posted September 2007, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

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

Don't laugh - I am being serious, but I was really lucky as a knight in a shiny wet suit came to my RESCUE. He was a staff member of the snorkelling/diving team. He helped me over come my fear by coming into the water with me. Once he had calmed me down and got me to control my breathing The film music in my head then turned from JAWS to 'THE SNOW MAN' you know the bit where he is holding the boys hand flying across the roof tops} this was me except I was flying above the sea bed. To glide across the surface of the water holding his hand and feeling very

safe and seeing the rainbow of coloured tropical fish and the coral was awesome. When you sit on the beach you do not realise what beauty lies beneath the waves. This experience was one I will never forget and I would like to take this opportunity to thank this young man {who's name I did not get} for making it happen and I am looking forward to trying it again in September. (A female customer, Sultan Garden Resort Reviews, posted August 2008, [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com))

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

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

Within the complex is an open air theatre, where the Italian entertainment squad put on a show every night, which can be anything from slapstick comedy or classical dance, to musicals like Dracula or Pinocchio!!! It's all in Italian of course, but very enjoyable nonetheless. (D Smyth, Reef Oasis Blue Bay Hotel review, posted August 2007, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

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

Entertainment activities are performed under the umbrella of ‘animation’ department that is in charge of co-ordination of sports and cultural entertainment for children and adults, and are managed by recreation experts, called “animateurs”. Costa et al. (2004) reports that the word animation derives from the Latin animus, which means soul, feelings, spirit, whereas animate as a verb stands for activating, enhancing life, giving breath, recreating and, in other terms causing a good mood, offering suggestion and possibilities for an active life style (see Jacovlev 1992)”. Online community members made many references to particular events whereby they have been involved in through the animation team members who motivate them. For example, the entertainment staff or the animation team was a noted feature of those narratives. As one member recounted:

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

(Miss S Smith, Conrad Sharm El Sheikh Resort Review, posted August 2007, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

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

the top of mount Sinai through the middle of the night to watch the sunrise at the top, absolutely exhausting but totally amazing. Egypt is unforgettable and we loved every minute”. On the basis of the results of the current study, hotel brand equity is likely to increase by conveying the memorability of the experience to the potential customers and by delivering the memorable experiences the brand promises.

Those experiences evoke different types of emotions. The affective emotional states elicited during the experiences can and will enable marketers and managers to better understand, design, and provide the experience that customers seek. Interestingly, a comment was made by one of the members on the emotions evoked, “It is difficult to express my emotions because the holiday was really, really nice, thanks to your hotel and special thanks to the hotel staff.” This is what Davis et al. (1991, p. 88), based on the work of Maslow and others, describes as a peak experience, “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 natural setting or the different excursions provided were seen as an indication of the novelty dimension. Novelty as an experiential need sought by customers was found in the customers posts. This finding is consistent with previous studies that investigated novelty subject Crompton (1979) and Dann (1981) and identified novelty as one of pull factors plays an important role in the decision making processes that tourists utilize in their choice of destination. Conceptually, the term novelty implies newness or uniqueness. Need for novelty refers to the desire to go from a known to an unknown place, or to discover new experience, thrill, and adventure (Lee and Crompton, 1992). Lee and Crompton (1992) study that identified four dimensions of novelty paradigm, change from routine, thrill, boredom-alleviation, and surprise. Findings from the qualitative study were more consistent with the notions of change from routine, thrill, and

surprise. Some reflections made by customer on the perception of the newness and uniqueness of the experience. For example, those two comments on the glass bottom boat trip: “This was the highlight of my holiday as we saw all the coral reefs, the fish were like nothing I have ever seen before....we even saw a few clown fish ‘Nemo fish’” and “A boat trip with snorkelling it is literally like being in an aquarium and the fish are not scared of you they come right up to investigate ‘once in a life time!!!’”.

Here is another example:

I had never been snorkelling before but once I had I wanted to go again and again. It was amazing; the fish actually swim right round you. The thing that put us off about it though was a stingray and 3 hammerhead sharks!!!!!!!!!! (Not at the same time though). We saw the Stingray when snorkelling but it was right at the bottom of the sea and it wasn't interested in us... We saw the 3 sharks when we were eating tea at the Grillhouse. It was weird to see, but hotel staff says that they are always about but only at night” (Miss L Mottershead, Dreams Beach Hotel review, posted June 2008, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

As the previous examples show, that customers were provided a form of change that enabled them to experience something different. Findings from the netnographic study also show that thrill or adventure for novelty-seeking customers characterize customer experiences. One customer recounted:

Do make sure you try the quad biking in the desert excursion. It is an amazing journey. I tried it, but found it difficult for my small arms to steer, so I jumped on the back of my companion's quad. I am glad I did, as the experience was even better shared, and being able to chat about it as we saw more and more of the desert open up before us. I wasn't that bothered about not driving one myself, even though I did try. Go in the evening, as it is a more varied and amazing experience. We set off about 5:30pm. If you go in

the evening, you see the sunset in the desert on your way. We stopped at a Bedouin camp where the kids are very playful and curious. Don't buy any goods from them as it is expensive. You then drive out to the echo valley where you stop and shout your name at the valley and hear it echo back at you. It is amazing. You drive back in the dusk with your headlights on. You always drive in a line behind the guide, so you are always safe and accounted for. Be careful for random abandoned tyres in the desert sand when you drive back at night. (Miss N Wooding, Crowne Plaza Resort Hotel Review, posted May 2008, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

Finally, surprise or unexpectedness is one of the dimensions of the novelty paradigm (Berlyne, 1960). Customer express surprise in their posts which stems from a discrepancy between what they expect and what is actually experienced. A striking example explains the surprise element of novelty, “Our room cleaner was extremely helpful and every day when we came back to our room he had made something extraordinary with the towels. One day he made a heart, the next a flower, then a snake and the best one of all was a swan, it was amazing. I used to take a photo each day, it was a lovely surprise coming back to our room each day to see what he had made.”

### **Recognition**

Recognition refers to the feeling of importance (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). From customer comments, it is obvious that staff exhibiting certain types of behaviour which made them feel important, such as: “Everything is "with pleasure madam", “The staff treat you like royalty and insist on not let you lift a finger even when I tried!”, “My daughter was treated like a princess”.

Customers feel right at home with the staff, because the staff is happy to see them, always have a smile on their faces, warmly greeting guests, and calling them by their name. That was illustrated in the following comments: “Reception has been altered slightly but the welcome from the check in staff, the security guards, the pool bar staff & pool attendants

were the same as ever & they all seemed genuinely pleased to see us again". This finding supports conclusion drawn by previous study of Otto and Ritchie (1996) where recognition was identified as an important factor of service experience, customers wanted to feel a sense of personal recognition from their service encounters, such that they could feel important and confident that they were being taken seriously.

### **Safety**

Visitors perceive Sharm el Sheikh as destination as a relatively safe region. This view is particularly apparent in those reviews where customers refer to the safety and security perception. In the tourism literature, an emergent consensus occurs that an association exists between crime and tourism and the crime rates are higher in tourist areas (Fuji and Mak, 1980; Mansfeld, 1996 Pizam, 1982; Pizam and Walmsley, 1983). Therefore, the safety of tourists is an increasing concern in holiday decision making because if tourists feel unsafe or threatened at a destination, they are not likely to enjoy the experience or even take part in any activities.

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

According to Prideaux (1996) resorts that offering a "hedonistic lifestyle have higher crime rates because of factors such as frustrated and poorly paid seasonal workers and drug subcultures that lead to a high incidence of theft. Furthermore, those resorts have a large



number of night clubs which led to higher levels of alcohol-related offences such as fighting, rape and rowdy behaviour. However, the analysis of the customer reviews resulted in the absence of those behaviours, and many references were made related to safety issue, particularly striking examples are provided by the members of the online community: “Heard stories of people going out and about lots of hassle to buy by the locals but will say one thing felt safe walking around as plenty of police about”, “The hotel complex took about 20mins to walk around completely and of an evening walk along was very lovely and you are completely safe as there is other hotels along side you as well as security walking about all the time”.

### **Sense of beauty**

People value experiences that instil a sense of wonder, beauty and appreciation (Pine and Gilmore (1999). Informants illustrated that they had a greater sense of beauty in their comments. Beauty is “an aspect of the experience of idealisation in which an object(s), sound(s), or concept(s) is believed to possess qualities of formal perfection” (Hagman, 2002, p.661). Sense of beauty has been recognized as an important human capacity and that the subjective experience of beauty is characterised by a sublime and exalted state that is unique, psychologically significant and desirable (Hagman, 2002). “The sense of beauty is the harmony between our nature and our experience. When our senses and imagination find what they crave, when the world so shapes itself or so moulds the mind that the correspondence between them is perfect, then perception is pleasure, and existence needs no apology (Santayana, 1896, p. 269)“ as (Hagman (2002) cites.

In the sense of beauty there is a feeling of wholeness, pleasure, lessening of anxiety, awe, joy, excitement, optimism and contentment (Hagman, 2002). The display of the beauty may be human made as found in art, reworks, architecture, or landscaped terrain (Stebbins, 1997), for example: “Walking through the grounds was difficult as we had to stop and admire the elegant and colourful landscaping at every turn and of course pose for photos.....Once we arrived at the top of the Domina Bay road, I was completely hypnotized

by how beautiful the resort was.....Very beautiful hotel built on a hill with the reception/foyer/restaurants at the top. The rooms are all spread down the hillside and a waterfall runs down between them. There is a funicular railway/elevator that runs up and down the hillside which is very cool.....I read an earlier review by somebody that stated the entrance to the hotel reminded them of the entrance to Jurassic Park. How true! It was partly the thrill and relief of finally getting there (safely) and partly awe that made our eyes widen at the beauty of the resort as we got driven to our room on a golfing style buggy” (Miss N Wooding, Crowne Plaza Resort Hotel Review, posted May 2008, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

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

The grounds are immaculate with bougainvillea, gardenia, and oleander. I don't know how they grow in the dry sandy soil but everything is beautiful.....The grounds are covered with beautiful flowers and waterfalls which make it a magical place to spend some time with the person you love.....Within 3 feet of getting into the water you will see beautiful colourful fish and the reef even though damaged has hundreds of beautiful fish.....A glass bottom boat trip.....was the highlight of my holiday as we saw all the coral reefs, the fish were like nothing I have ever seen before....It brought tears to my eyes to see something so beautiful.

(Mrs LJ Langmead, Conrad Sharm El Sheikh Resort review, posted February 2008, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

## **Relational**

The netnography research captures another important component of customer experience which is the relational experience that involves the person, consumption or use of a product with other people (Gentile et al., 2007). Tourism provides an outlet for youth to

experiencing sexuality and relationship (Page and Connelle, 2006). Relational experience appeared as an important factor in customers' reviews. The results tend to confirm that social interaction is an integral part of their experience. It was evident that customer found interesting people with whom to develop a closer. For example "Staff was friendly... I and my friend, Steph, made good friends with 2 of the staff in the lobby bar.... Zazza (as I call him) and Ali.... such lovely guys and I actually miss them". Another example by one female customer talking about her relationship with one member of the restaurant staff:

While I was staying at Dreams beach I met someone known as Waggy, he works in the restaurant that is by the main pool. I had the chance to kiss him before Ramadan started and I didn't—dam it! I'm going back especially just to see him in February 2008. Really miss him loads, my family absolutely loved him and wanted him to marry me. (S Louise Read, Dreams Beach Hotel review, posted October 2008, [www.holidaywatchdog.com](http://www.holidaywatchdog.com))

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

## **CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM MARKETING**

Despite the importance of the theme of customer experience, the relevant literature does not define the construct of customer experience well (Carù and Cova, 2003). The literature offers only a few definitions of customer experience (sources include Carbone and Haeckel, 1994; Gentil et al., 2007; Meyer and Schweger, 2007; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Robinette et al., 2002; Schmitt, 1999; Shaw and Ivens, 2002). Insufficient empirical research is available on hospitality experience consumption from the consumer perspective. Therefore, this study attempts to gain meaningful degree of understanding of customer experience construct. The qualitative research captured numerous important components of customer experience which were consistent with previous studies.

This study was conducted based on gaps found in the literature concerning what is customer experience which is a poorly defined concept (Caru and Cove, 2003) and what constitute customer experience. A theoretical contribution of this study follows from using the netnography method (Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2001 and 2002) 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 tourism research technique. Only few marketing researchers have adapted netnographic methods (Brown et al., 2003; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998; Nelson and Otnes, 2005).

This study in this article expands understanding of the construct of customer experience. Although the research is useful for advancing theory and providing resort management insights, the study has limitations. First, the netnography study, by its nature, is limited to those customers who send their reviews online. The focus of the study was on customer reviews that written in English. The study does not consider those customers who have not post their reviews online. The results could be different if the study included both online and offline tourists community to examine their experiences. Therefore, care should be given in interpreting these findings.

This study focuses on customer experience in the resort-hotel context from customer's perspective and its effect on brand loyalty. The results of this study suggest a number of implications for service, marketing and brand managers. Egypt is a global destination that offers comprehensive and diversified tourism, aggressive expansion plans, new brand launches of hospitality establishments. The outcome for Egypt is continuing growth in the number of tourists. The knowledge of customer experience and the challenge of creating great customer experience is of utmost importance for the continuation of this growth. Many destination marketing strategists acknowledge the importance of customer experience but they have very little knowledge of what components of customer experience in the hotel context.



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**Table 1: The number of the examined customer reviews**

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



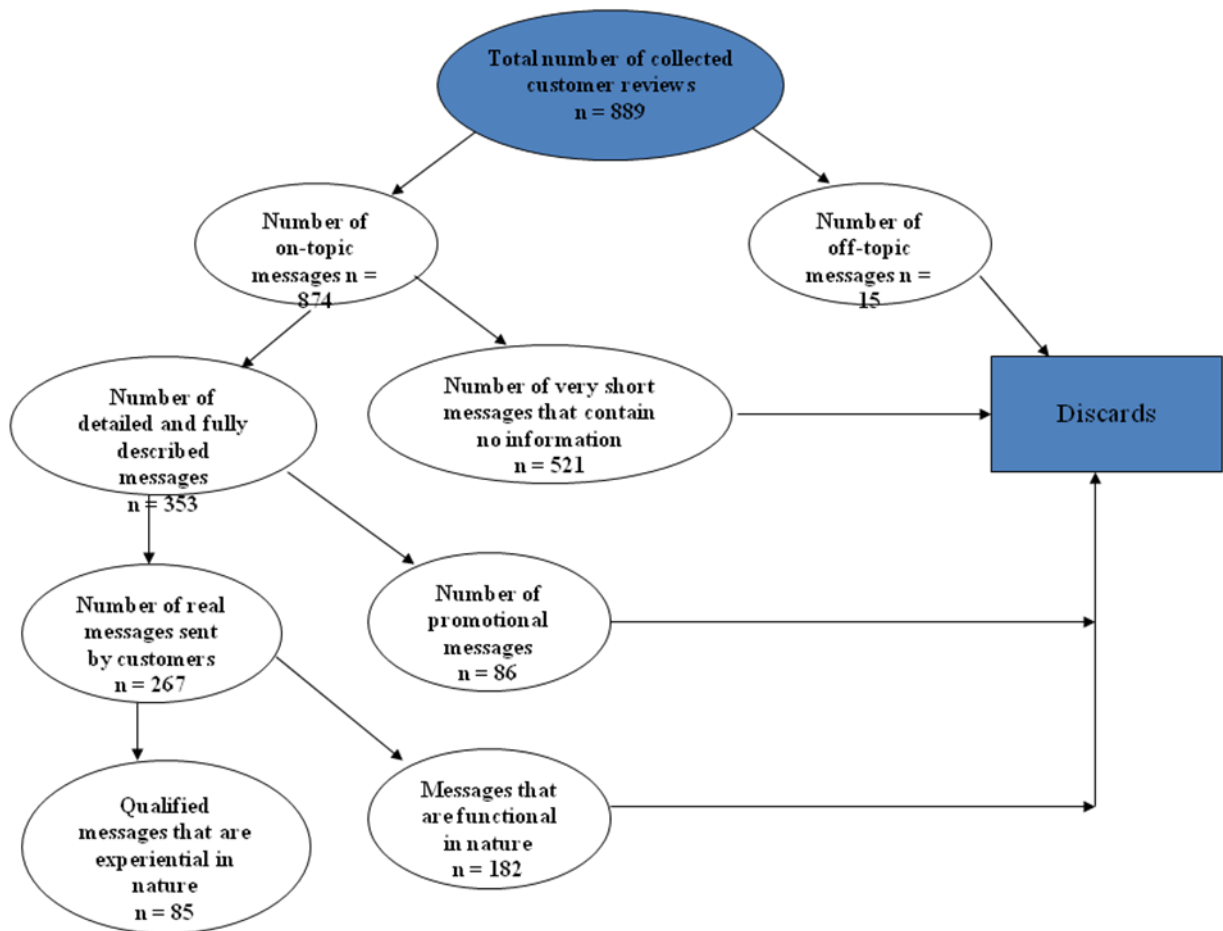


Figure 1. Customer Review Selection Process