



XXX International Scientific Conference

Strategic Management

and Decision Support Systems
in Strategic Management

SM2025

Subotica (Serbia), 16 May, 2025

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ANTECEDENTS OF CO-CREATION OF EXPERIENCE IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY: STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING APPROACH

Abstract: The focus on consumers is prevalent in numerous service industries, including the hotel sector. In this context, it is crucial for management to analyze guest experiences continuously. This is particularly significant for luxury hotels offering wellness spa services. Through the use of these services, guests have the opportunity to experience individual transformation, both physical and psychological. The achieved sense of well-being surpasses satisfaction and often fosters a willingness among consumers to participate in improving existing services and actively creating new ones. One of the well-known models highlighting the key components of consumer experience is the new Experienscape model. According to the structure of this model, the following components of consumer experience are distinguished: sensory, functional, natural, social, cultural, and hospitality cultural components. In the Experienscape model, the consumer is an active participant who strives to co-create their experience, transform it, and achieve satisfaction with the service and their life. This paper aims to identify the components of the Experienscape model that most significantly drive the co-creation of consumer experience. Structural equation modeling was applied to test causal relationships. The results of the study can provide a valuable foundation for improving the strategy of developing long-term relationships between hotels and users of their wellness spa services.

Keywords: hotel industry, wellness spa, Experienscape model, co-creation of experience

1. INTRODUCTION

Customers frequently alter their behaviors based on the surrounding environment, and recent trends have shown that changes in global markets, especially within the hotel industry, have led businesses to adopt stricter measures and innovate to address evolving challenges. These adaptations have produced positive results in the short term (Sharma et al., 2021). Service quality plays a critical role in building customer confidence and satisfaction, impacting various levels within a hotel organization (Sureshchandar et al., 2002). Key factors influencing customer satisfaction in the hotel industry include cleanliness, aesthetics, integrity, functionality, reliability, and security. These aspects are often significant sources of dissatisfaction and are associated with tangible service elements (Johnston, 1997). They continue to be top priorities for hotels and are expected to influence customers' decisions when choosing a hotel for booking (Sampaio & Régio, 2022).

The hotel industry is characterized by intense competition and a wide range of offers, making it challenging for hotel brands to stand out. (Veloso & Gomez-Suarez, 2023). When guests visit a hotel, they interact with a variety of products and services offered by the establishment. The quality of their experience is shaped by whether these offerings meet their needs and expectations. On the other hand, the nature of services provided in the hotel industry is hedonic, while the outcome of consuming these services is primarily psychological (Hemmington, 2007; Walls, Okumus, & Wang, 2011). Due to these characteristics, the hotel service sector is one of the most experience-intensive sectors. Given the

involvement of consumers in the service creation process, examining their experience is of great importance. Hemsley-Brown (2019) define customer experience in the hospitality industry as the “cognitive and emotional assessment of direct and indirect contacts with the service organization, physical environment, and social environment, coupled with the psychological, symbolic and cognitive outcomes accorded to the customer from specific encounters”.

Measuring consumer experience has gained increasing attention from experts in marketing, tourism, and hotel management, with recent studies focusing on the concept of transformative experience. This type of measurement is particularly crucial in the hotel industry. In this context, the **Servicescape** plays a pivotal role by shaping the overall experience and influencing customer perceptions, which in turn affects their sense of well-being and transformation. By examining the physical, social, and emotional elements of the hotel environment, the **Experienscape model** offers a comprehensive framework to better understand these triggers and how they impact the guest's experience.

In today's competitive market, many hospitality businesses are becoming more customer-focused and offering experience-based services (Knutson et al., 2006). Their goal is to create memorable experiences by not just meeting but exceeding the expectations of customers or tourists (Van Boven and Gilovich, 2003). Some companies aim to provide multicultural and immersive experiences (Scott et al., 2009; Miao, 2011) by engaging guests on sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational levels, rather than simply offering functional services (Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Lashley, 2008). These businesses focus on experience co-creation, where both the company and the guest actively collaborate to shape the overall experience. Ultimately, they strive to build interactions that foster shared value creation with their guests.

As businesses in the hospitality sector become more customer-focused and experience-driven, it becomes essential to identify the key components of the Experienscape model that significantly contribute to the co-creation of meaningful and memorable experiences for guests. Considering the above mentioned, this paper aims to identify the components of the Experienscape model that most significantly drive the co-creation of consumer experience.

The paper is structured into several parts. After the introductory section, the second part of the paper covers the customer orientation in a hotel industry with a focus on the experience co-creation and Experienscape model dimensions. The third part of the paper includes an explanation of the research methodology used, while the fourth part presents the results of the conducted research. The conclusion discusses the theoretical and practical implications and highlights the limitations and directions for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Customer Orientation in the hotel industry

Marketing is central to the successful implementation of business strategies, as today's competitive environment demands a continuous focus on delivering superior quality services to customers (Day & Wensley, 1988). In fact, Hening-Thurau et al. (2002) argue that because services are intangible and require a high level of integration and interaction with customers, a strong customer orientation is crucial for the economic success of service companies.

This importance is especially evident in the hotel industry, which has unique characteristics compared to other sectors. Hotels sell both tangible products and intangible services, making the marketing process particularly challenging. Consumers often purchase hotel services without experiencing them firsthand, and they rely on reviews, recommendations, and promotional materials to form expectations about their stay. Consequently, achieving sustainable success in hotel marketing depends on customer satisfaction (Uğurlu, 2020).

The concept of marketing orientation reinforces this idea by emphasizing a customer-centric approach - one that focuses on understanding and meeting consumer needs to generate long-term profit through satisfaction (Kotler & Armstrong, 1994). As Ruekert (1992) defines market or customer orientation, it involves gathering and using customer information to develop strategies that respond effectively to their needs. Building on this, Bruhn (1995) defines customer orientation as the ongoing process of collecting, analyzing, and implementing customer expectations to establish stable and economically advantageous relationships over time. Thus, for hotels, being customer-oriented is not merely a sales strategy; it is a fundamental approach that should permeate every level of the organization. Active implementation of customer orientation creates a knowledge base that enables hotel management and employees to continuously learn about the perceptions and needs of current and prospective guests, ensuring that the services offered truly align with what customers desire (Uğurlu, 2020).

All characteristics mentioned make the hotel sector one of the most experience-driven industries. Given the active involvement of consumers in shaping the service experience, analyzing their experience is crucial (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019). This emphasis on consumer experience highlights the importance of interactions between businesses and customers, where value is created through engagement rather than being delivered solely by the company.

The success of hotel marketing relies on creating positive customer experiences. This focus on engagement sets the stage for value co-creation, where customers and businesses work together to enhance the service experience.

According Service-Dominant Logic, businesses cannot independently create value. Instead, value is co-created through interactions between the business and the customer. Co-creation is defined as customer participation in the creation of

products or services by applying resources such as time, effort, or ability (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008). In this framework, the customer is not just a passive recipient but an active partner who “creates value with the firm” (Lusch et al., 2007). Recent studies suggest the need for further research to better understand the process of value co-creation and the participants' perspectives, which is essential for improving the management of this collaborative process (Navarro et al., 2014). Co-creation with tourists in the hospitality industry is a widely studied phenomenon. Navarro et al. (2016) have examined the relationship between value co-creation and customer satisfaction in spa services. Some scholars have presented a framework for customer engagement and co-creation with reference to hospitality transactions (Chathoth et al., 2016).

2.2. Servicescape and Experienscape

The Servicescape plays a critical role in shaping customer perceptions and behaviors in the hospitality industry. It encompasses the physical and social elements of the hotel environment that influence how customers interact with the space and make purchasing decisions. The Servicescape of a hotel significantly influences customer purchasing behavior and market segmentation (Hee Lee & Lee, 2015). Due to the simultaneous production and consumption inherent in the service industry, hotel customers often have limited knowledge of available services, leading to high levels of uncertainty and perceived risk (Reimer & Kuehn, 2005). In this context, Servicescape components enhance customer awareness of the hotel's offerings and facilitate informed evaluations (Artuğer, 2020).

Kotler (1973) defines Servicescape as “design of buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his or her purchase probability”. More specifically Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) found that “Servicescape comprises not only objective, measureable, and managerially controllable stimuli but also subjective, immeasurable, and often managerially uncontrollable social, symbolic, and natural stimuli, which all influence customer approach/avoidance decisions and social interaction behaviors”. Bitner (1992) categorized Servicescape into three key dimensions: ambient conditions, spatial layout, and signs, symbols, and artifacts. Ambient conditions encompass sensory elements such as temperature, lighting, noise, music, and scents, which influence the overall atmosphere. Spatial layout pertains to the arrangement of furnishings and equipment within a service environment, ensuring functionality and ease of movement (Siu et al., 2012). Signs, symbols, and artifacts serve as visual and interactive cues that communicate information, guiding customer behavior and shaping perceptions of the space (Liu & Jang, 2009).

However, Bitner's original Servicescape model did not account for the natural, cultural, and social aspects of the environment, which can Liu significantly enhance and transform the consumer experience (Dimitrovski et al. 2024). To address this limitation, Pizam and Tasci (2019) introduced the Experienscape model, an advanced framework that evaluates consumer experience through six key environmental components: sensory, functional, natural, social, cultural hospitality culture component. This model extends the traditional Servicescape concept, making it particularly suited for measuring and enhancing experiences in service industries like hospitality (Line & Hanks, 2020).

The “Experienscape”, widely considered synonymous with “Experiencescape”, refers to the “experience landscape” in which experiences are co-constructed (Pizam and Tasci, 2019). To provide a deeper understanding of the Experiencescape framework, the following dimensions will be explained as key components contributing to a memorable and satisfying customer experience.

Sensory Experienscape dimension encompasses visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and taste stimuli that enhance customer satisfaction and emotional connection (Dimitrovski et al., 2024). When customers perceive the atmosphere as favourable (for example attractive design and layout, pleasant music and comfortable lighting), such visual and sensory stimuli have the potential to enhance their on-site experiences (Chen et al. 2024).

Hotels, give significant attention to the functional aspects of the experience setting (Dimitrovski et al., 2024). Functional Experienscape focuses on the physical layout, furniture, and equipment that ensure comfort and ease, improving customer experience (Bitner 1992). Social dimension covers interactions between customers and staff, social atmosphere, and crowdedness, shaping the overall experience. This dimension was not part of Bitner's (1992) Servicescape but was used by other studies (Jang et al., 2015). Social interaction has long been recognized as a key factor in enhancing experience satisfaction in hospitality, whether it occurs between guests and hotel staff or among guests themselves (Dimitrovski et al., 2024). Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) included a natural dimension to servicescape. This dimension includes green spaces, natural lighting, and scenic views that promote relaxation, well-being, and satisfaction. Pizam and Tasci (2019) defined hospitality culture as “a system of shared norms, values, beliefs, traditions and expectations whose ultimate goal is to provide exceptional service and memorable experiences to all the organization's stakeholders.”

Radic et al (2021) state that, in the tourism field, the concept of the Experienscape is relatively new and under-researched. However, despite its novelty, some scholars have already begun exploring this topic, shedding light on its potential impact across various tourism and hospitality contexts. Quan and Wang (2004) discussed the early mention of the “Experienscape” concept in tourism research. They laid the groundwork for understanding how the environment in which services are consumed affects customer experiences and satisfaction. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) highlighted the growing importance of customer experiences in tourism and hospitality, arguing that creating memorable experiences is a key objective for businesses in these industries. Similar to Quan and Wang (2004), O'Dell (2005) explored the concept

of, focusing on its application in tourism. They emphasized the role of the physical environment in shaping tourist experiences and the significance of emotional and sensory elements in creating memorable experiences. Dimitrovski et al (2025) found that besides social, all other dimensions of Experienscape are positive drivers of guest satisfaction with a wellness spa hotel experience.

All the Experienscape model components shape the overall guest experience. These components create a setting in which customers are not just passive recipients but active contributors, fostering experience co-creation. In this context, by engaging with the hotel's physical, social, and cultural cues, guests help tailor and enhance their own service experience, which in turn drives long-term customer satisfaction and value for the business (Kandampully et al., 2022). This interplay between the Experienscape elements and active guest participation ultimately leads to a more personalized, memorable, and co-created experience that benefits both customers and service providers.

1. METHODOLOGY

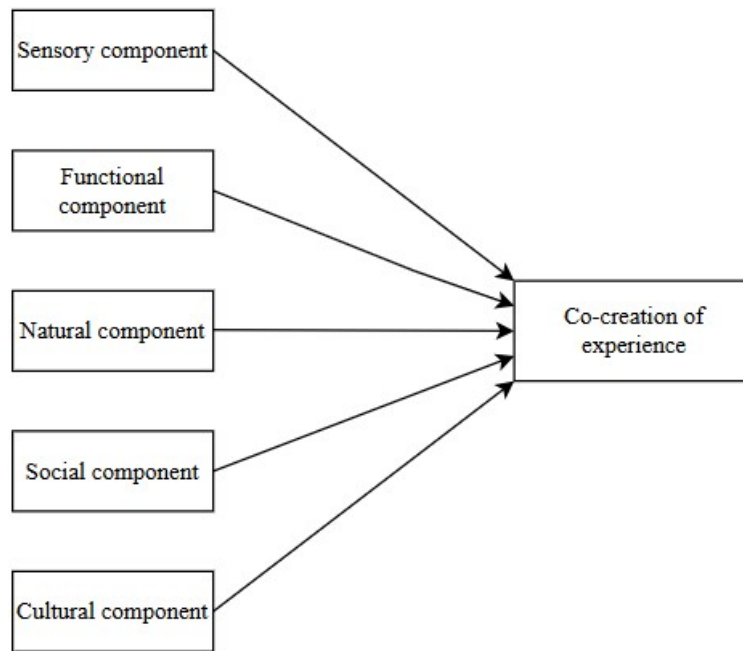
The research was conducted on a random sample of 567 respondents who, after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, visited at least once one of the hotels in the Republic of Serbia offering wellness spa services. The researchers aimed to examine various components of the user experience of wellness spa services in hotels during the post-pandemic period, considering that the pandemic significantly changed the concept of how wellness spa hotels operate. Today, guests visit these hotels much more for health reasons, and physical and mental well-being, compared to the period before the pandemic.

For the random selection of respondents, a sampling frame containing basic demographic data on guests of luxury hotels in the Republic of Serbia over the past five years was used. Additionally, before the interviews began, each contacted respondent was asked a filter question about whether they had used wellness spa services in hotels at least once after the pandemic. Only respondents who answered this question affirmatively met the criteria for participation in the research.

Looking at the sample structure, women dominate the sample (58.7%), respondents with a university degree make up 39.5%, and in terms of age, the sample predominantly consists of members of Generations Y and Z (60.8%).

The study primarily analyses the concept of guest experience in the context of using hotel wellness spa services. Specifically, the study examines the following components of experience: sensory, functional, social, natural, and hospitality culture components, measuring their impact on the co-creation of guest experience. These experience components were selected based on the structure of the Experienscape model (Pizam and Tasci, 2019). The proposed model represents an adaptation of the original Experienscape model, as it does not include the cultural component, given that the sample consisted of domestic guests. Unlike numerous studies where satisfaction or a specific loyalty component is positioned as the dependent variable, this research focuses on co-creation as a crucial determinant of consumers' willingness to actively engage in the process of improving existing and creating new services, thereby enhancing their overall experience with hotel wellness spa services. The research model is presented in Figure 1.

Respondents expressed their level of agreement with the questionnaire statements using a seven-point Likert scale. Each of the six constructs was measured through at least three statements derived from relevant literature sources. Specifically, the basis for formulating the statements measuring the guest experience components was the study conducted by Pizam and Tasci (2019). The statements measuring the co-creation of experience were taken from the study conducted by Carù and Cova (2007).



Picture 1: Research model
Source: Authors' research

When it comes to the data analysis, in the first step we tested the reliability, validity and model fit. For the purpose of reliability analysis, we calculated Cronbach alpha values for each construct (reliability test). Then we examined the average variance extracted (AVE) for every single latent variable (convergent validity test). In addition, we used following indicies to test the model fit: χ^2/df ; goodness-of-fit index (GFI); normed fit index (NFI); comparative goodness of fit (CFI); Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI); incremental fit index (IFI); relative fit index (RFI); root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). In the second step, we used structural equation modelling (SEM) to test the effects of five Experiencescape components on the Co-creation of experience.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

To determine the internal consistency of the statements used to measure the latent variables in the model, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. The value of this indicator ranges from 0 to 1, and the internal consistency of the statements, i.e., the reliability of the variables, is considered good if Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). For all five components of the experience, Cronbach's alpha is above 0.8, with the highest reliability observed in the natural component (0.92). Cronbach's alpha for the co-creation of experience is 0.83.

The results of the model fit testing are presented in Table 1. The model demonstrates a good fit, as the χ^2/df value falls within the desired range of 2–5 (Marsh and Hocevar, 1988). Additionally, the values of GFI, CFI, TLI, IFI, NFI, and RFI indices exceed 0.9. Furthermore, the RMSEA value is below 0.08 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham, 2006). It is important to note that the model also meets the criterion for convergent validity, as the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeds 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 1: The model – fit indicies

Fit indicies	Recommended value	Measurement model
χ^2 / df	between 2 and 5	2.91
GFI	> 0.9	0.91
CFI	> 0.9	0.95
TLI	> 0.9	0.94
IFI	> 0.9	0.95
NFI	> 0.9	0.93
RFI	> 0.9	0.92
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.06

Source: Authors' research.

Table 2: Results of Structural equation modeling

Relationship	Estimate	Significance
Sensor component → Co-creation of experience	0.400	$p < 0.01$
Functional component → Co-creation of experience	0.339	$p < 0.05$
Social component → Co-creation of experience	0.598	$p < 0.01$
Natural component → Co-creation of experience	0.181	$p < 0.1$
Hospitality culture component → Co-creation of experience	0.163	$p > 0.1$

Source: Authors' research.

In the main part of the statistical analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied to examine the causal relationships between constructs. The coefficient of determination is 0.36, meaning that 36% of the variability of co-creation of experience is explained by the regression model. Of the 5 tested effects, 4 were found to be statistically significant. The results of the SEM analysis are presented in Table 2.

The strongest influence on co-creation of experience comes from the social component. This result suggests that interactions with other guests and hotel staff positively contribute to the respondents' willingness to actively engage in the co-creation process of hotel wellness spa services. The effects of the sensory and functional components are also significantly pronounced. The experience of functional elements such as room design, reception, hotel interior, and equipment in the wellness spa center, as well as the feeling of relaxation provided by various wellness treatments, encourage guests' readiness to participate in service improvement. The influence of the natural component, i.e., the landscape and hotel environment on co-creation of experience, is weaker but still statistically significant. The only component that does not significantly affect co-creation of experience is the hospitality culture component. This result is surprising but likely suggests that guests are primarily willing to offer advice to managers on how to improve their services through interactions with employees and based on their perceptions of hotel rooms, restaurants, wellness center facilities, and external surroundings, but they do not show interest in engaging in the process of improving the overall hospitality strategy of the hotel, which requires a more detailed strategic analysis. In contrast, many elements of the remaining experience components can be improved through appropriate tactical decisions. Additionally, the hospitality culture component, aside from focusing on consumers, also involves relationships with other relevant stakeholders, and in this context, hotel guests may not be sufficiently informed or interested in this aspect of hotel operations.

4. CONCLUSION

Consumer experience analysis is an important activity in contemporary marketing research. In the context of hotel business, it is crucial to identify those factors that allow consumers to undergo a complete individual transformation during their stay, both physically and psychologically. One of the most comprehensive models that allows the measurement of various components of experience, and which adapts very well to the context of hotel business, is the **Experienscape** model. The concept of this model highlights six key components of experience: sensory, functional, natural, social, cultural, and hospitality cultural components. The aim of the conducted study was to identify the component of the **Experienscape** model that most significantly encourages consumers' willingness to actively engage in the process of improving hotel wellness spa services. The results identified the social component as the strongest determinant, but both the sensory and functional components also have a very strong influence on the **co-creation of consumer experience**.

The paper provides several important theoretical implications. The effects of the components of the consumer experience in hotel wellness spa services on the **co-creation of experience** were measured, which gives the paper particular innovativeness. A multi-variable approach was applied in the measurement of experience, where five components of experience were isolated in accordance with the **Experienscape** model. This model has been tested in a very small number of studies in the hospitality industry so far. The scientific contribution of the paper also lies in the fact that in the proposed model, **co-creation of experience** is positioned as the dependent variable. This is a very important variable that reflects consumers' willingness to actively participate in the process of improving services and their own experience, thus providing management with useful input for enhancing existing business strategies.

The study also has several limitations. It was conducted at a single point in time, so successive measurements would contribute to identifying changes in consumer experience. Additionally, the sample included only domestic guests of luxury hotels in the Republic of Serbia, which means that the results do not have a global character. It would be useful for future research to conduct multigroup structural equation modeling to track differences in the strength of variable relationships in the model between observed segments. Finally, future models may include new variables such as affective attachment and behavioral intentions.

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