

Toward an understanding of consumer perspectives on experiences

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer a consumer-centric perspective on experiences and interactions that is consistent with the foundational premises of the service-dominant logic of marketing, and which incorporates an increased understanding of the value derived from consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper offers a reoriented framework and process consumer experience modeling (CEM) for analyzing consumer interactions in experience domains. CEM uses qualitative analysis methods and software, underpinned by constructs relating to first-, second- and third-order interactions undertaken by consumers. It is illustrated with reference to the “gap year travel” experience domain.

Findings – The approach offers a means for identifying value enhancers and inhibitors for consumers. It provides, for organizations, a representation of consumer perspectives on interactions, giving due regard to C2C interactions. The example of the gap year travel experience demonstrates how this information can be used to inform the nature and emphasis of future marketing initiatives of organizations that are operating within the experience domain.

Research limitations/implications – The framework and some of its key concepts require verification in other experience domains to test their robustness. The increased availability of consumer “voice” data (via blogs, etc.) offers great opportunities for the development of consumer-centric approaches to experience analysis.

Originality/value – This work represents one of the first reported attempts to adopt an empirical approach to issues that have been raised by the foundational premises of the service-dominant logic of marketing, and consider, and provide a structure to interactions and experiences from a consumer perspective.

Keywords Consumer marketing, Consumers, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Introduction

The service-dominant (s-d) logic of marketing is underpinned by ten foundational premises (FPs) (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). The role of the customer, *vis-à-vis* the enterprise or firm, is conveyed in *FP6-FP10*, i.e.

- FP6.* The customer is always co-creator of value.
- FP7.* The enterprise cannot deliver value, only value propositions.
- FP8.* A service-centered view is inherently customer oriented and relational.
- FP9.* All social and economic actors are resource integrators.
- FP10.* Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary.

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As such, customers use and integrate their resources to determine idiosyncratic and meaning-laden experiences in the co-creation of value. Their resources include family, commercial and social networks (Arnould, 2007; Gummesson, 2008). Given the importance ascribed to customers through these FPs, there are opportunities to supplement current s-d logic conceptualizations by developing a greater understanding of the nature and complexity of customer/consumer experiences, and the value derived through consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions within consumers’ family, commercial and social networks. To do so involves a move from a focal firm focus on interactions and relationships to one that has a customer-centric focus (Fournier *et al.*, 1998; Gummesson, 2005; Noble and Phillips, 2004; O’Malley and Prothero, 2004; Szmigin, 2003).

From a consumer’s perspective, an interaction with any firm is only one of a myriad of interactions (or connections) that influence their consumption experience (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2001; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). Much research to date, however, has given primacy to the “focal firm” perspective, exploring ways to compete by forging one-to-one relationships with consumers, often to the

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detriment of consumers. Within the s-d logic of marketing, consumers have primacy as operant resources and represent the key source of competitive advantage (see *FP4*; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). This provides a stimulus to understand more fully the value consumers derive from their network of interactions within a consumption experience, as well as those with the focal firm. The “common denominator of a customer centric relational focus is a view of exchange which is driven by the individual consumer perceived benefits from potential exchange partners’ offerings” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 12).

A customer-centric perspective on experiences brings with it the need to develop a better understanding of the value derived by consumers from one particular set of interactions within this network; the consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Martin and Clark, 1996; McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Price and Arnould, 1999). Despite long being noted as an important aspect of the service encounter, C2C interactions research has been underdeveloped in the services literature (Davies *et al.*, 1999; Moore *et al.*, 2005; Nicholls, 2005). C2C interactions could involve either close acquaintances or strangers, and can add value for consumers in terms of social benefits (Arnould and Price, 1993; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) improved productivity (Bettencourt, 1997; Rodie and Kleine, 2000) and stabilizing effect in some settings (Harris and Baron, 2004). They are integral to network theory conceptualizations of marketing (Gummesson, 2006).

In this paper we suggest a framework and process for taking a consumer-centric perspective on experiences and interactions, especially C2C interactions, which are consistent with the FPs of the s-d logic. The framework, coupled with the process – consumer experience modeling (CEM), that also has the potential to provide empirical evidence of resource integration capacity of customers (Arnould *et al.*, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2006) – constitute the primary contributions of the paper.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a framework for the study of interactions from the consumer perspective is conceptualized. This is presented as a reorientation of existing frameworks that focus on the focal firm, and it explicitly acknowledges the importance of C2C interactions within the network. Second, an example is provided, using the student gap year travel experience domain, of a process for undertaking research in line with the reorientated framework. This process has been labeled “consumer experience modelling” (CEM). From the analysis of data on the network of consumer interactions within the experience domain, a range of consumer value enhancers and inhibitors are identified which provide insights as to the benefits that consumers derive from their experiences. A summary of CEM is provided together with managerial implications. The paper concludes with an outline of limitations and suggestions for future research.

Focal firm versus consumer perspective

Customer and consumer experiences underpin the current emphasis on consumer co-creation of value (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008) such that, according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, p. 137), “value is now centered in the experiences of consumers”. Experiential consumption research is a key strand of studies into marketplace cultures

that strive to identify “cultural meanings, sociohistoric influences, and social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in the myriad messy contexts of everyday life” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 875). The purpose of this section is to offer a framework that takes a consumer perspective on experiences and interactions.

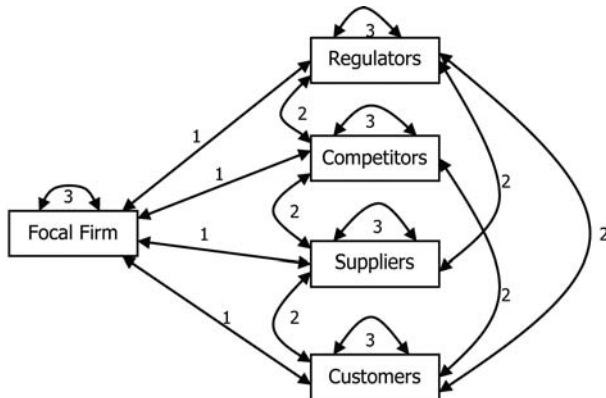
Gummesson (1997) and Grönroos (2004) imply that, within the relationship process, it is interactions that form the relationships that develop in the various networks of providers and consumers, and interactions are seen as central to a relationship marketing approach. Much of the work, therefore, on firm-consumer interactions has been developed in the context of relationship marketing.

Focal firm perspective

The conceptual and theoretical developments in relationship marketing contain insights from both market-based and network-based relationship marketing. Although market-based activity has always been viewed as “more consumer-oriented RM and network-based, more interorganisationally-oriented” (Möller and Halinen, 2000, p. 29), both strategies are developed from the view that the management and control of these relationships rests with the focal firm. This position has been confirmed more recently by Grönroos (2004): “The focal relationship is the one between a supplier or provider of goods or services and buyers and users of these goods or services. Relationship marketing is first and foremost geared towards the management of this relationship” (p. 101).

In developing strategies to cultivate both market- and network-based relationships, some consideration has been given to consumer benefits, in order to “sell” the initiatives to consumers. Those most frequently cited include reduced switching costs, and the social benefits, which occur when customers feel they are receiving special attention from an organization (Gwinner *et al.*, 1998; Oliver, 1999). However, the dominant consideration in shaping the nature and form of such strategies continues to be the potential benefits to the focal firm. At extremes, customers are viewed as “prospects” (Christopher *et al.*, 1991) and the strategy is to “lock them in” to the focal firm (Colgate and Lang, 2001; Pressey and Mathews, 2000). The heavy emphasis on guidelines for focal firms to catch and hold on to customers can result in a lack of regard of the real world complexity that consumers experience (Gummesson, 2005), and a lack of focus on consumers’ feelings about the firm’s relationship marketing efforts (Noble and Phillips, 2004). With reference to Gummesson (1999), Grönroos (2004) acknowledges that, in order to facilitate the management of the focal firm-consumer relationship, other stakeholders in the process may have to be involved. “If marketing is to be successful, other suppliers, partners, distributors, financing institutions, the customers’ customers, and sometimes even political decision makers may have to be included in the management of the relationship in the network of relationships” (p. 101).

The myriad critical relationships are explicitly acknowledged within Martin and Clark’s (1996) classification of first-, second- and third-order relationships. Their framework (see Figure 1) provides a succinct and useful overview of the network that reflects the currently dominant perspective of relationship marketing. The first-order relationships are those which the focal firm has directly with other stakeholders in the marketplace: regulators, competitors, suppliers and customers. The second-order

Figure 1 Classification of first-, second- and third-order network relationships

Notes: 1 = first-order relationship, 2 = second-order relationship, 3 = third-order relationship

Source: Martin and Clark (1996)

relationships are the networks of relationships that take place between the various players. The third-order relationships are the internal relationships in the players' organizations, and include customer-to-customer interactions. Martin and Clark (1996) argue that the presentation in Figure 1 facilitates a broad, comprehensive picture of the network of relationships (in both B2B and B2C) that prevents the elements being treated as isolated phenomena.

Consumer-to-consumer interactions as part of the consumer's network

Significantly, Martin and Clark emphasize the importance of including C2C interactions into the wider network of relationships.

A growing stream of research has begun to suggest that C2C relationships have a large impact on value creation for individual consumers, which should afford them more attention within the consumer's relationship network (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Gummesson, 2006; Harris and Baron, 2004). Of particular relevance for this study are the findings that identify the specific value that consumers derive from C2C interactions over and above benefits derived from interactions with "the firm". In studies of C2C conversations in retail settings, for example, it was found that consumers valued the opinions they received from other consumers, and regarded their comments as more credible than salesperson's comments (Davies *et al.*, 1999). Research on relationship marketing within online communities further reinforces the importance of C2C interactions within a consumer experience (Henning-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Szmigin *et al.*, 2005). Henning-Thurau *et al.* (2004) identify a range of benefits that consumers derive from their online C2C interactions, which arguably go beyond those obtained from relationships with the firm. They include the opportunities for social interaction, to express concern for others, and to enhance self-worth.

An alternative network: the consumer perspective

Based on the review of relevant literature on relationship marketing, C2C interactions and consumer experiences, we offer a re-oriented framework of interactions that adopts the

perspective of consumers within an experience domain (see Figure 2).

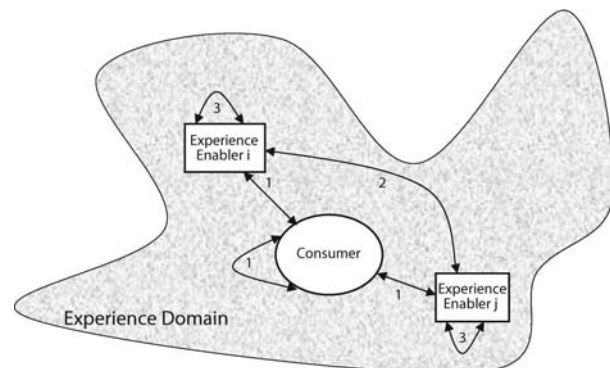
The notion of experience domain is central to the framework, as its parameters are defined and recognized by consumers themselves, in contrast to the focal firm. We have defined an experience domain as a field of knowledge, activity and discourse that stimulates consumers to engage in purposeful interactions with a network of organizations and consumer communities in the course of experiences that are collectively understood. The framework in Figure 2 emphasizes that, by considering interactions in an experience domain, a complementary, but different approach is being offered to that which examines customer experiences as the accumulation of multiple touch points on a customer journey with a single organization (Voss and Zomerdijs, 2007), and/or which employs service blueprinting to visualize the service processes within a single organization (Bitner *et al.*, 2008).

In Figure 2, all the first-order interactions are those direct interactions that a consumer may encounter in an experience domain. The first-order interactions include C2C interactions with both acquainted and unacquainted fellow consumers, and interactions with experience enablers – inanimate entities that provide the consumers with adequate power, means or opportunity to carry out the activities that contribute to their experiences, for example, organizations, facilities, technology, special events, and finance. There will be variable numbers of experience enablers in different experience domains. Figure 2 simply shows experience enablers *i* and *j*. The second-order interactions are those between the experience enablers. The third-order interactions are the internal ones within each experience enabler.

Illustrations of the re-oriented framework

Two examples of experience domains, from papers in the services literature, illustrate the framework adopted in Figure 2.

First, there is the adolescent girl shopping mall experience (Haytko and Baker, 2004). An individual girl's consumer experience in that domain will involve first-order interactions with other consumers (acquainted, such as friends or parents who accompany them to the mall, and unacquainted, such as the boys they meet and "scope"). These are critical interpersonal relationships, whose value and influence is frequently underestimated by service providers (see, for

Figure 2 Interactions from consumer experience perspective

Notes: 1 = first-order interaction, 2 = second-order interaction, 3 = third-order interaction

example, Gummesson, 2006; Harris and Baron, 2004; Mangleburg *et al.*, 2004; McGrath and Otnes, 1995). Also important, as first-order interactions, are those with the experience enablers, such as mall operators, retailers within the mall and food-courts, and less obvious ones such as the school, whose year length and day length affect mall experiences, and special events – birthdays, dances – that trigger mall visits. The second-order interactions are those that take place between the experience enablers: in this scenario, those that take place, for example, between the mall management, the retail stores and food-court operators. Third-order interactions, as in Figure 1, are interactions that exist within these organizations as they impact the consumer experience, e.g. interactions between employees in a retail store.

Second, there is the scuba-diving experience (MacCarthy *et al.*, 2006). Here, first-order interactions of the divers are with acquainted other consumers (diving friends), unacquainted other consumers (divers sharing the same boat or exploring the same site) and with myriad experience enablers (including dive sites, destination, charter boats, waves and visibility, boat captains, boat crew, equipment hire, dive-masters, dive shops, training agencies, wetsuits, length of time in water, souvenirs and photographs). Second-order interactions would include those between charter boats and equipment hire companies. Third-order interactions would include internal communications between boat captain and crew, or between management and employees of scuba diving training agencies.

In comparison with Figure 1, the framework in Figure 2:

- Takes a consumer experience perspective; exploring networks of interactions in a consumer experience domain.
- Acknowledges a range of experience enablers that includes, but goes beyond the enabling organizations or firms.
- Gives C2C interactions a higher priority as first-order rather than third-order.

So far in this paper, we have developed a reoriented conceptualization of networks of interactions, which highlights the centrality of the consumer, rather than the focal firm, and acknowledges the consumer as an operant resource. For Figure 2 to be used in a purposeful way, a four-stage process of consumer experience modeling (CEM) is now proposed that can generate a rich picture of first-order consumer interactions, identify a range of consumer value enhancers and inhibitors, and supply organizations with insights as to how to develop relationship marketing strategies, consistent with the service-dominant logic of marketing, within an experience domain. In the next section, CEM is outlined as it relates to a particular experience domain; gap year travel. First, however, we clarify the notions of consumer value enhancers and inhibitors.

Consumer value enhancers and inhibitors

Grönroos (2004) contends that, without understanding the internal value-generating processes of customers, firms cannot create value for customers successfully. Additionally, where consumers are concerned, it has been argued that striving to achieve results that fulfill their needs is akin to consumers seeking a better quality of life (Fournier *et al.*, 1998).

Payne *et al.* (2008) maintain that customer value creating processes should be viewed as “dynamic, non-linear and often unconscious processes” (p. 86). Furthermore, based on ideas first presented by Korkman (2006), they argue that “value is embedded in customers’ practices, and that value can be enhanced through positive interventions, or further development. The supplier’s motivation should be to improve these customer practices in order to build value for the customer and a more valuable role for itself in the customer’s activities” (Payne *et al.* (2008, p. 87).

The aim of the re-oriented framework in Figure 2 is to focus on consumer perspectives on practices in an experience domain, unencumbered by focal firm (supplier) priorities. Its purpose is to seek out value, for consumers, that emerges from examining interactions and practices that underpin their experiences. Some interactions, through interpretation of consumers’ own voice, will contribute to enhancing the consumers’ well-being within the experience domain (value enhancers), while others will be seen to inhibit consumer well-being (value inhibitors). Identification of interactions and practices that enhance or inhibit consumer value should give direction to the firms/suppliers that form part of the consumers’ experience domain, as to how they can build value for consumers through contributing to the improvement of consumer practices.

Consumer experience modeling: a suggested process for undertaking research that has a consumer-centric perspective on experiences and interactions

The process is explained with reference to the gap year travel experience domain.

The experience domain: gap year travel

“Gap year travel” represents an experience domain as defined in the preceding commentary. In the UK, “gap year” is common parlance for a year’s gap between school and university (usually at 18 years of age), or between university and full-time employment (usually at 21 or 22 years of age). In either or both cases it is becoming increasingly common for students to travel to other countries, often working overseas for part of the year. It has been chosen to illustrate the CEM procedure because it represents an extended experience with many opportunities for consumers to interact, and it was anticipated that the consumers (gap year travelers) would be employing their operant resources (cultural, social, physical (Arnould, 2007) extensively. Also, pragmatically, there was access to a large sample of consumers in the experience domain.

Stage 1: data collection

To adopt a consumer perspective on gap year experiences, the data collection process should yield genuine “voices” of the consumers expressed as part of their own cultural constellation. To date, qualitative research approaches have been used widely to explore the experiential aspects of consumer value. They include mainstream methods such as focus groups and in depth interviews as well as more unconventional approaches such as subjective personal introspection (Holbrook, 1995, 2006), qualitative diary research (Patterson, 2005) and weblogs. In this project, students were instructed to carry out personal interviews with

direct/indirect consumers of gap years to gain insights on actual consumer behavior, and use discussion groups to elicit student attitudes towards gap year travel. They were educated on how to carry out personal interviews as part of a second year Market Research course, and also were given practice in facilitating and participating in discussion/focus groups. Utilizing students to recruit and interview consumers has a history in services marketing, going back to Bitner *et al.* (1990) (see also, for example, Janda *et al.* (2002) and Forbes *et al.* (2005)). In this context, the approach was particularly appropriate given that university students are at the epicenter of the marketplace for gap year travel. The sample consisted of direct consumers (students who take the gap years) and indirect consumers (relatives/friends, etc. who may help finance the gap year, and/or be recipients of news from the gap year student throughout the travels).

The 11 student groups each carried out three interviews and one discussion group. All interviews and discussion groups were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The interviews lasted between ten and 40 minutes, and the discussion groups between 25 and 40 minutes. The discussion groups, consisting of between five-to-eight students recruited from other departments in the university, and a minority of the interviews, took place on university premises with permission. The remaining interviews took place at the homes of the respondents. Given that the data collection exercise was an important part of the course assessment, each group had to provide the audio-tapes as evidence of the accuracy of the responses. Some transcripts, especially those relating to the shorter interviews, lacked acknowledged quality criteria for an interview (i.e. spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant answers from respondents (Kvale, 1996)). They were excluded from further analysis. As a result, transcripts of 11 discussion groups and 24 personal interviews constituted the consumer voice database. All transcripts contained verbatim accounts of direct/indirect consumers and potential consumers of the gap year travel experience. The transcripts were submitted on disk as a requirement of the student assignment, and then imported into NVivo by one of the authors to prepare for further analysis. The personal interview and discussion group transcripts provided a total of over 42,000 words for analysis. NVivo was employed as an efficient code and retrieve facility, not as a driver of the analysis strategy (Siedel, 1991).

Stages 2-4 of CEM (below) were carried out by the authors.

Stage 2: data coding

The unit of analysis is a sentence or a paragraph, depending on the substance or content, insofar as it contains material relevant to the first-order interactions presented in Figure 2. The unit is allocated to one or more of these headings: consumer-to-consumer acquainted (C2CA), consumer-to-consumer unacquainted (C2CU), consumer to experience enabler. The number of experience enablers identified (from the data) will increase throughout the process. To illustrate the procedure for coding, the first passage of a personal interview with a gap year traveler is reproduced here. The respondent's responses are numbered and relate to the discussion on coding that follows.

Interviewer: Where did you go on your gap year?

Respondent: I went to Seville, which is in Spain [1].

Interviewer: What did you do there?

Respondent: I worked over there as a nanny for 7 months [2].

Interviewer: In a nursery?

Respondent: No, it was with a Spanish family looking after their child. I looked after the child while the mother went to work, but I stayed with the family at their house [3].

Interviewer: What were your reasons for going on a gap year?

Respondent: I went because I thought it would help me to learn the language as part of my languages degree course. Plus I felt like I needed a break from proper education before starting a uni course [4].

Interviewer: How did you go about organizing it?

Respondent: Well my university was the first port of call. They advised on the paths to take in order to organize the year out. It was mostly a matter of finding a family willing to hire a non-Spanish nanny, which turned out to be less of a problem than I first anticipated. The whole process was less hassle than I first thought it would be. My parents were very helpful too, they helped me in contacting the various people [5].

Interviewer: What influenced your decision on where to go on your gap year?

Respondent: It was suggested by the university. But I had friends that were going on a gap year for the same purposes as me and we'd decided to go to the same place because we felt we'd be able to support each other and help one and other settle more easily [6].

Interviewer: What sources helped you with your decision? Which didn't?

Respondent: As I mentioned earlier my university helped me with suggestions of destinations and were excellent at offering advice about what the place was like etc. [7].

(the interview continued).

The numbered responses, allocated to the respondent above, can be coded as follows:

- 1 The Experience Enabler category "destination" was created. The sentence was coded in C2E (destination).
- 2 The Experience Enabler category "job in gap year" was created. The sentence was coded in C2E (job in gap year).
- 3 The sentence was coded in C2CU.
- 4 The Experience Enabler category "university" was created. The sentence was coded in C2E (university).
- 5 The paragraph was coded in C2E (university), and in C2CA.
- 6 The paragraph was coded in C2E (university), and in C2CA.
- 7 The sentence was coded in C2E (university).

We limited ourselves, at this stage, to the consideration of first-order interactions only, although it would be possible to identify second- and third-order interactions, provided that they impact directly on the consumer experience. For example, in the passage above, a second-order interaction would be that between the university and the destination, and a third-order interaction would be that between the parent and child of the Spanish family at the destination, Seville.

As the remainder of the interview is coded, and the other interviews/discussion groups are coded in a similar way, more paragraphs/sentences are added to the existing categories, and new C2E categories are created. Reading and re-reading the transcripts leads to modifications, and sub-division of the C2E categories. For example, the experience enabler "job" was sub-divided into "jobs before travel" and "jobs in gap year", as the enabling roles of the sub-divided categories, and the meanings attached to them by the consumers, were interpreted as being different. The completed list of (17) experience enablers consisted of accommodation, airline, bank/money, bus, destination, e-mail, events organizer, insurance, internet, jobs before travel, jobs in gap year, medical, rail/train, school, telephone/cell phone, tour company, travel agent and university. Providers/

organizations involved with any of these enablers play a part in creating consumer experiences of gap year travel.

Stage 3: data retrieval

Once the coding is complete, it is relatively simple to retrieve, using the software, sentences/paragraphs grouped under the headings of C2CA, C2CU, and all the C2E categories.

Extracts of the C2E (university) contents illustrate the format. (The letters at the beginning of each response denote the initial of the respondent's first name).

Document "Discussion Group 11", 7 passages, 3186 characters.

Section 0, Paragraph 23, 240 characters.

D: (pensively) Yeah, well I knew I wanted to go to uni but I guess I just wanted a break as well, I mean I just thought that I had, um, spent a long time in education and I think I almost deserved to have some time off to my self as well.

Section 0, Paragraph 31, 155 characters.

D: Well I didn't really know what course I wanted to do, just that I wanted to go to uni and travel, taking a gap year was the best option for me I think.

Section 0, Paragraphs 41–49, 746 characters.

B: I thought that going to uni was more important at the time to me.

(C nods in agreement, D shakes her head)

D: (in a questioning tone but humorous tone) So if you had a gap year, did you think you wouldn't go to uni or something?

B: (laughing) Well, for me I just thought that if I went on one I might never come back! Seeing all those other cultures and stuff

C: Yeah, that was completely the same for me. I thought that once I stopped learning, then I would never want to learn again – they would have had to have dragged me back kicking and screaming in to education ...!

Document "interview 1", 1 passages, 453 characters.

Section 0, Paragraph 14, 453 characters.

I'm less apprehensive about trying new things. When you travel, you meet so many people and experience so many new things. I'm able to embrace new challenges now, for example, at university I had that self confidence to reassure myself everything would be ok and that I'd make friends quickly. I've approached my education differently too. Education used to feel like a huge burden of stress that dragged while I'm now more positive with my learning.

(and much more ...)

Stage 4: theme identification

At this stage, as with most qualitative research processes, themes can be identified from the retrieved data (i.e. the first-order interactions). The focus here is on searching for values that are pertinent to consumers. This is in contrast to a focal firm perspective that sees customer value in terms of the value of a customer to the firm, as is implied, for example, in the computations of "customer lifetime values" (Payne and Frow, 2005).

Gap year travel: consumer value enhancers and inhibitors

Extracts of consumer value enhancers and inhibitors that emerged from this study are presented in Table I. The authors separately, and then, collectively identified the key elements that appeared to enhance or inhibit the quality of life of the gap year travelers and their families. The phrases and sentences used in Table I were agreed by the authors as representing the key elements. Many of the identified consumer value enhancers and inhibitors may be known already to those facilitating the gap year travel experience: for example, how the experience helps "confidence and interpersonal skills" (see C2CA, C2CU and University-C2E in Table I), and exposes travelers to a "variety of life-changing experiences/adventures" (see C2CA, School-C2E and University-C2E in Table I). However, this form of analysis of interactions will inevitably reveal some new higher-order needs: for example how the experience "offers individuals the opportunity to emulate the success and experiences of their siblings" and gives them "valuable thinking time to plan for

the future". The analysis also captures the importance of ensuring that any support mechanisms offered by parents do not take away the implicit challenge in the experience and make it too easy for consumers.

Within Table I, the value enhancers and inhibitors that cut across a number of interactions are highlighted in italics. These can be considered as the "core" value enhancers and inhibitors in the experience domain. For example, enabling travelers to handle their relationships with their parents is clearly critical to improve the experiences. What additional strategies might be developed to help reduce parental concerns at various stages of the experience? Tour companies might build a "parent meeting" into their schedule of activities, or banks may offer special loan packages to help parents fund their child's gap year travel.

Findings and general discussion

Recognizing the consumer interaction network

One potentially very useful outcome of the data coding and retrieval is a visual representation the collective "consumer gaze" of the experience domain in terms of the relative frequency of mention of the first-order interactions (see Figure 3). In Figure 3, the highest acuity is at the core of the range of vision, with lesser acuity in the inner and outer peripheries, respectively.

Two points should be made here. First, individual organizations rarely, if ever, have access to the consumer network of interactions, as the normal visual direction is from the organization/supplier to the consumers. The gaze provides clues as to how an organization (be it bank, university, insurance company, or travel agent) plays its part in the consumers' interactive networks within the experience domain. Knowledge of whether an organization is in the core, inner periphery or outer periphery of the collective consumer gaze ought to provide directions for the organization's marketing strategies. In particular, the information could reveal the potential for inter-organizational collaboration to create stronger, more meaningful consumer interactions. Second, it is, at this stage, a relatively simplistic representation of the collective gaze, based on placing experience enablers into three segments in terms of frequency of mention by consumers (in the interviews and discussion groups): the top third in the core, the second third in the inner periphery, and the bottom third in the outer periphery. It has the virtue of being a simple procedure, but decision-makers in the domain may need to increase the intensity of the gaze by conducting additional research beyond the CEM process. This is discussed later.

Further potential for CEM

By considering consumer value enhancers and inhibitors (and not concentrating explicitly on the focal firm), it is possible to create a basis for organizations involved in an experience domain to coordinate their marketing efforts and create strategic alliances (i.e. specifically acknowledge second-order interactions). For example, in addressing the question "How can the needs of 'meeting new people' and 'learning new cultures first-hand' be enhanced?", various enablers such as travel agents, tour operators, and representative of tourism departments of popular destinations can work together to enhance the authenticity aspects (Huxley, 2005) of gap year

Table I Gap year travel value in customer interactions (first-order interactions)

Interaction		Value in customer interactions	
		Value enhancers	Value inhibitors
C2C	Acquainted	<i>Variety of "life changing" experiences/adventures</i> <i>Builds confidence and interpersonal skills</i> Traveling with friends reduces anxiety Financial and practical support from parents <i>Opportunity to emulate siblings success and experiences</i> Escape from parental control <i>Escape from general problems, e.g. exam stress, mundane life</i>	<i>Parental concerns, e.g. negative impact on career, safety</i> <i>Traveling with friends makes experience too easy</i> Lack of financial support <i>Takes you out of the "learning cycle"</i> Peer pressure to overspend <i>Homesickness</i> Difficulties keeping in touch with parents Peer pressure to go
	Unacquainted	Traveling with friends reduces anxiety Opportunity to get information about gap year experiences of others Exposure to different cultures and lifestyles Financial and general independence More positive attitude to learning on return Job during gap year can alleviate boredom <i>Builds confidence and interpersonal skills</i> <i>Escape from general problems, e.g. exam stress, mundane life</i> <i>Meet new people who become life long friends</i> <i>Gives a clearer idea of future plan. Time to think and focus</i>	<i>Traveling with friends makes experience too easy</i> Fear of having an accident and not being able to pay Fear that insurance company will not pay out if you have an accident <i>Homesickness</i>
C2E	Bank/money	Financial support from parents Opportunity for financial independence from parents Overdraft support from banks Working before travel gives finance Financial planning by parents and student before trip can make things a lot easier Government loans provide support	No money to take a gap year Fear of "running out of money". Not having enough to get home Fear of bank problems, e.g. excessive overdraft or bank charges Sorting bank problems in a foreign country Facing overwhelming debt on return
C2E	E-mail	<i>Way of reducing parental anxiety</i> Cheaper than phone call Enables continuous communication Helps relieve homesickness Made possible by internet cafes Enables you to convey excitement of the experience Supplements telephone call Can communicate visual experiences Enables planned communication Enables communication across time differences Gives control to the sender	Lack of e-mail access points in remote locations Raises parents expectations about contact options and frequency
C2E	Jobs during gap year	Having a job prior to leaving reduces anxiety Work is easy to find Having to find job when on year out is considered part of the leaning experience Unpaid work is satisfying and enhances exposure to other cultures Work gives insights into future career possibilities All work exposes you to cultural experiences Having a variety of jobs enhances exposure to a range of experiences Work has a focus i.e. pays for aspects of the trip therefore enhances commitment Temporary work gives flexibility to change itinerary, and freedom to control work hours	Diversity of jobs can be too stressful Work compulsory to fund gap year experience
C2E	School	Opportunity to get information about gap year experiences, e.g. gap year fairs and careers advisors Doing work in gap year enhances employability <i>Gives a clearer idea of future plan. Time to think and focus</i> <i>Opportunity to emulate siblings success and experiences</i>	Negative attitude of school towards gap year

(continued)

Table I

Interaction		Value in customer interactions	
		Value enhancers	Value inhibitors
C2E	Tour company	<i>Variety of "life changing" experiences/adventures</i> <i>Escape from general problems, e.g. exam stress, mundane life</i>	
		Gives exposure to wider range of experiences <i>Way of reducing parental anxiety</i> Source of information Takes away "hassle" Good for arranging certain aspects of the trip	Expensive Plays on peoples insecurities <i>Makes experience "too easy", seen as "spoon feeding"</i>
C2E	University	Opportunity to get information about gap year experiences, e.g. university guild Universities consider that gap year students have enhanced social skills, maturity and greater level of commitment to university course <i>Meet new people who become life long friends</i> <i>Builds confidence and interpersonal skills</i> <i>Variety of "life changing" experiences/adventures</i> Doing work enhances employability Work that links to future career and university course is valued <i>Gives a clearer idea of future plan. Time to think and focus</i> A "window of opportunity" which might not come along as part of normal career route <i>Financial and practical support from parents</i> Saving money for trip is a good discipline	Takes you out of the "learning cycle" Takes you off the career path Can lead to financial hardship Top universities do not offer deferred entry <i>Parental concerns, e.g. negative impact on career</i>

travel. Likewise, in addressing the question "How can the concerns about the break in education through gap year travel be assuaged", universities, in particular, may need to re-visit their marketing communication systems. With such considerations, third-order interactions are being questioned directly.

General discussion

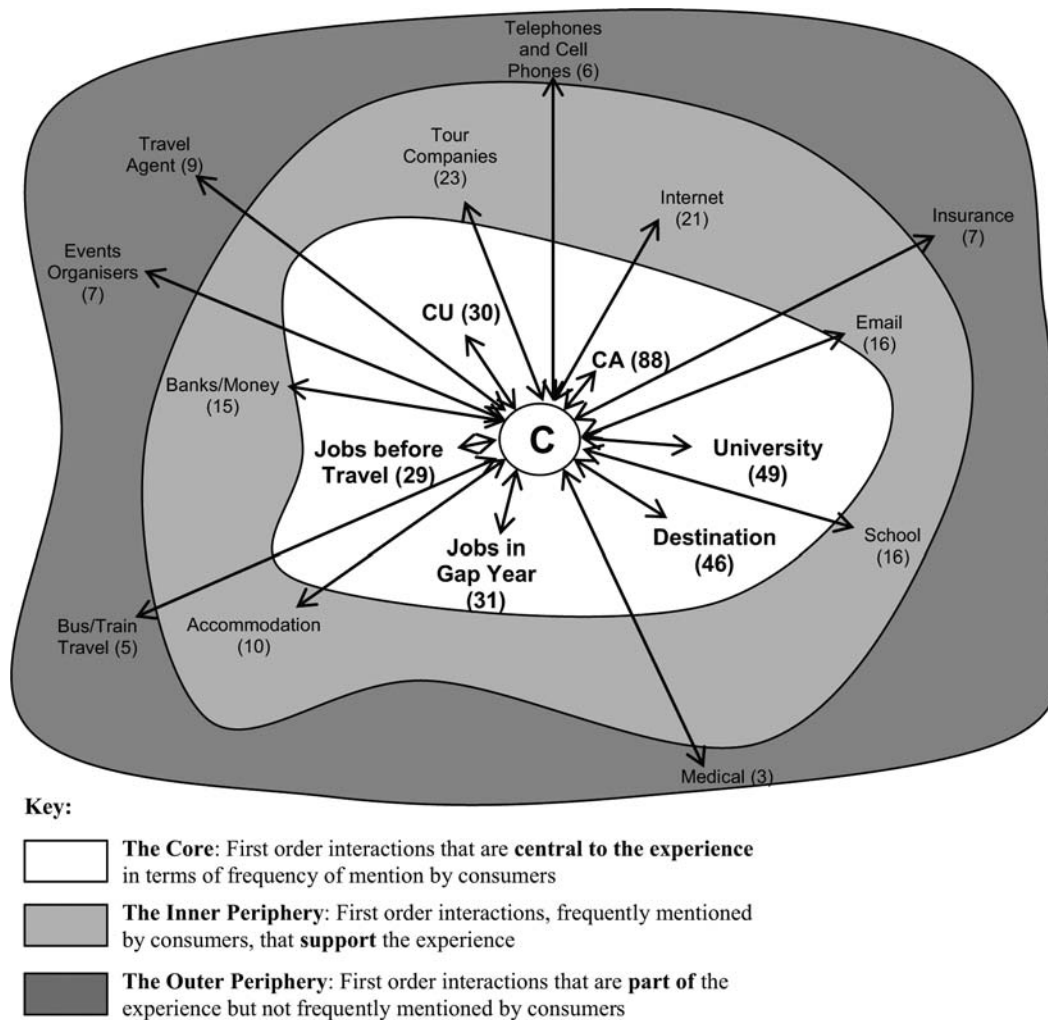
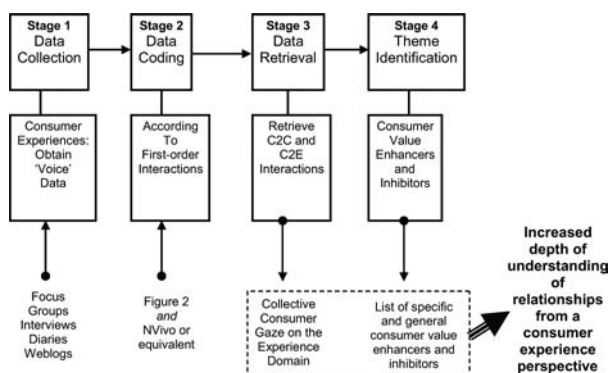
The purpose of this paper was twofold. First, in contrast to other studies, which consider relationships primarily from the perspective of the focal firm, we have tried to develop our understanding of the nature and complexity of consumer experiences within a particular experience domain. In particular we wanted to learn more about the value consumers derive from their interactions. Second, we wanted to focus more attention on one set of interactions within the domain: C2C. Both of these objectives are central to *FP6-FP10* the service-dominant logic of marketing. Consumers are considered to be critical to the process of value creation and have the potential to add value through their interactions with other consumers as well as those with a focal firm.

From a practice perspective, this customer-centric focus is facilitated through the application of the four-stage process of consumer experience modeling (CEM), which is outlined in Figure 4. CEM clearly employs a well tried qualitative research approach, but one where data coding is guided by first-order interactions of the framework in Figure 2. In our view, such an approach increases understanding of interactions from a consumer experience perspective, in particular C2C interactions, and can therefore aid marketing strategy-making by experience enablers within an experience domain.

In Stage 1, it is essential to obtain qualitative voice data of consumer experiences within an experience domain. In Stage 2, it is recommended that coding is undertaken into categories that correspond to the first-order interactions defined in the alternative network represented by Figure 2. It is essential that the coding is carried out with the help of a qualitative data analysis software package, such as NVivo. The outputs/findings from CEM occur at Stages 3 and 4. At Stage 3, the retrieval facility of the software package is employed to provide separate documents relating to the various first-order interactions; consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-experience enabler interactions. An output from this stage is a representation of the collective consumer gaze (as illustrated in Figure 3) that demonstrates the range and centrality of interactions that consumers have within the domain. At Stage 4, researchers are encouraged to identify themes, from the retrieved documents, that relate to value enhancers and inhibitors for consumers. It is helpful to highlight them, initially, for each separate document, and then identify the enhancers/inhibitors that cut across the categories. They represent the other outcomes from the CEM process, and here the emphasis is on organizational experience enablers, associated with the experience domain, being able to incorporate the consumer value enhancing/inhibiting issues into strategies that can build long term relationships with consumers.

Managerial implications

The additional understanding of interactions from a consumer experience perspective represents important management information, especially insofar as it challenges experience enablers within an experience domain to construct

Figure 3 Consumer interaction network based on collective consumer gaze – gap year travel experience domain**Figure 4** Consumer experience modeling: a process

relationship building strategies that address the identified consumer value enhancers and inhibitors. Such a process may involve examining the synergies gained through the combination of complementary operations of organizational experience enablers, and the management of coalitions within

an experience domain, as emphasized in the concept of domesticated markets (Arndt, 1979).

The managerial implications for such organizations may involve a consideration of second- and third-order consumer interactions in the context of relationship strategy-making, and a re-thinking about the co-creation of value propositions (Lusch and Vargo, 2006). In the B2B literature, it has been argued that suppliers can, and should provide value propositions “by making their offerings superior on the elements that *matter most* to target customers” (our emphasis), and that this involves customer value research “which requires time, effort, persistence, and some creativity” (Anderson *et al.*, 2006, pp. 94 and 96). There are clear parallels in the B2C marketplace. Investigation of consumer networks by CEM has the aim of identifying what matters most, and is of value, to consumers in their own experience domains. Research on processes of organizational value-proposition-creation, that incorporates the consumer value research findings that become available through CEM, will have appeal for organizations searching for superior offerings.

An example is now given. One key question arising from a study of value enhancers and inhibitors in the gap year travel experience domain was:

How can the concerns about the break in education through gap year travel be assuaged?

Maybe this is a question that should be addressed seriously by UK universities. While some universities offer advice to students proposing to take a gap year prior to starting their university course, and some programmes (for example, foreign language degrees) regard “a year abroad” as an essential part of the programme, normally the incorporation of gap year activities means a disruption to the established university systems. There is an opportunity for a university to actively embrace gap year travelers, encourage them to apply, and build in course activities that draw on the experiences and capabilities that the consumers have attained. Such a strategic move would involve serious revision, through internal marketing and communication, of attitudes and actions throughout the whole university, in order that it would not be seen simply as a cynical recruitment activity.

But it need not stop there. Strategic alliances could be developed with, say, employers and travel companies, and internal marketing could embrace the current student body. The university could engage itself in the entire gap year experience as evidence of its commitment to the student. It could become involved with the “job before travel” element – something that most gap year students must undertake – through the university careers service. Perhaps there are alternatives to work in bars and fast-food outlets, even ones that are beneficial to the proposed course that has been selected? Most universities have student travel service organizations on their premises that can aid the year out, and have both undergraduate and postgraduate students from many of the destinations chosen by gap year travelers. They could put the gap year student applicants in touch with appropriate contacts.

Some of these ideas may appear fanciful, but they should illustrate that imagination and creativity can (should?) be employed to address a fundamental question, relating to an experience domain, that encourages a strategic response. In this case, the issue is how to help incorporate the gap year into the learning cycle and career path, rather than it being perceived simply as a “break” in education, in order to diffuse parental anxieties and contribute to the life-planning of the gap year traveler.

We believe that, by offering a detailed appreciation of the “consumers” vision’ of value in interactions, organizations will be better placed to develop competencies and differential positioning centered on these values. In addition, the consumer perspective provided by CEM draws attention to, and highlights the role and value of consumer-to-consumer interactions, traditionally neglected in marketing research. Finally, we believe CEM can strengthen the “resource-integration” function of the firm. The detailed customer vision of value enables organizations (and consumers) to identify connections between experience enablers and develop customer focused co-operative marketing strategies.

Conclusion

A complementary approach to that which views relationships from the perspective of the focal firm is offered here. The

paper addresses a key element in a service-dominant view of marketing, in that it provides a means for identifying “relationships that involve the customers in developing customized, competitively compelling value propositions to meet specific needs” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 5). Through the provision of a framework for exploring interactions from a consumer experience perspective, and a process, CEM, that facilitates an analysis of interactions as seen from the consumer, an opportunity is offered for gaining an increased depth of understanding of relationships from a consumer experience perspective. While not unique, we believe that the approach adopted in this paper is truly aligned to the customer-centric marketing philosophy that underpins the service-dominant logic. By developing a new procedure, the paper is contributing to advances in marketing as an applied discipline (see Rust, 2006).

Limitations and future research

It was found to be difficult to define precisely two key concepts of the framework in Figure 2; experience domain and experience enabler. In the case of experience domain, it has similarities with Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s (2004) concept of a value creation space. The value creation space, however, is an environment, created by companies, that generates consumer co-creation experience variety. An experience domain is the consumers’ space. Some organizations are experience enablers, but not all experience enablers are organizations, and this can result in the requirement for more subtle interpretations of interactions and relationships. While it is helpful to seek greater precision in the definitions of the two concepts, it may not be easy to achieve. Gummesson (1997, p. 270) reminds us that “... because social phenomena are not in themselves precise ... definitions can only be used as vehicles for thought, as perspectives, or as indicators of essential properties of a phenomenon”.

In Figure 3, a representation of the collective consumer gaze was offered in an effort to present, visually, the first-order interactions as voiced by the consumers. It was based on frequency of mention, and frequency of mention can be affected by many situational factors. The outcome presented in Figure 3 gives credence to taking a consumer perspective on interactions and relationships, and should provoke organizations, contributing to the experience domain, to discuss relationship strategies in a different light. A move to a more intensive gaze would require data collection that adds to, and complements the CEM database. Knowledge of the relative importance to consumers of the various consumer first-order interactions would help all organisations associated with the experience domain. This could be achieved through additional research in the form of a questionnaire-based survey that asks members of the gap year travel community to rank the experience enablers, identified through CEM, in terms of importance.

In the data coding stage of CEM, only first-order consumer interactions were formally subjected to the later stages of data retrieval and theme identification. While first-order interactions yielded a wealth of information at these later stages, there is reason to expect that analysis of second- and third-order interactions contained within the transcripts, that impact on consumers’ experiences, will yield additional, potentially valuable information. It is hoped that this can be facilitated through future refinements of CEM. One such

refinement could concentrate on resource integration activities of consumers. FP9 implies that consumers, as well as providers, are resource integrators. A fruitful area of further research would be to supply empirical evidence of consumer (individual or household) resource integration activities. Data collected through CEM could be developed for this purpose. An examination of the contents of Table I, for example, provides clues that, in seeking to reduce parental anxiety/concerns (a core value enhancer), gap year travelers integrate social resources (C2CA), technological resources (C2E (e-mail)), and private sector resources (C2E (Tour companies)). The additional inclusion of second-order interactions, insofar as they impact on the consumer experience, would offer greater potential for a more detailed study of consumer resource integration capabilities.

Finally, it is not being suggested here that the reoriented framework (Figure 2) with the CEM process is the only way to explore the complexity of consumer experiences and the value of C2C interactions. However, we believe that it has potential to uncover subtle elements of value for consumers that have relevance to experience-enabling organizations. It takes the notion of customer experience beyond that of “the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company” (our emphasis) (Meyer and Schwager, 2007, p. 118). It has been found to be robust by the authors in other domains concerned with extended consumer experiences; for example new parents, retired people. Overall, it is hoped that the ideas presented in this paper will encourage research that treats consumers as active participants in relationships (operant resources), rather than units that are managed by marketers in an asymmetrical way (operand resources). As Fournier *et al.* (1998) contend, “Marketers serve as the boundary between the consumer and the company. And, in that capacity, they are both representatives of the company and advocates for the customer’s point of view” (p. 51).

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Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

Travel broadens the mind, so they say, but it is the interaction with people from different cultures, communities, walks of life which is a major part of the enriching experience. Parents having to help fund “gap year” experiences for their children might wonder why they are having to stump up the cash for an adventure they themselves did not have, but are usually happy to help out with the money, making arrangements, and gleaning information from other parents whose offspring have been involved in this need for travel before settling down to work or further studies.

There is a lesson here for service providers who subscribe to the view that selling is a simple matter of an arrangement between themselves and a customer. Just like the gap-year travelers and their families, who are involved in a multitude of conversations with others about the project, consumers’ interaction with any firm is only one of myriad interactions and connections that influence their consumption experience.

A customer-centric perspective on experiences brings with it the need to develop a better understanding of the value derived by consumers from one particular set of interactions within this network; the consumer-to-consumer (C2C). Despite long being noted as an important aspect of the service encounter, C2C interactions research has been underdeveloped in the services literature. C2C interactions could involve either close acquaintances or strangers, and can add value for consumers in terms of social benefits, improved productivity and stabilizing effect in some settings. They are integral to network theory conceptualizations of marketing.

By offering a detailed appreciation of the “consumers’ vision” of value in interactions, organizations will be better placed to develop competencies and differential positioning centered on these values

In “Toward an understanding of consumer perspectives on experiences” Steve Baron and Kim Harris use the “gap year travel” domain to suggest a framework and process for taking a consumer-centric perspective on experiences and interactions, especially C2C interactions, which are consistent with the foundational premises of the service-dominant logic. Central is the notion of experience domain – a field of knowledge, activity and discourse that stimulates consumers to engage in purposeful interactions with a network of organizations and consumer communities in the course of experiences that are collectively understood.

A complementary approach to that which views relationships from the perspective of the focal firm is offered. Through the provision of a framework for exploring interactions from a consumer experience perspective, and a consumer experience modeling (CEM) process that facilitates an analysis of interactions as seen from the consumer, an opportunity is offered for gaining an increased depth of understanding of relationships from a consumer experience perspective.

First-order interactions are those direct interactions that a consumer may encounter in an experience domain. The first-order interactions include C2C interactions with both acquainted and unacquainted fellow consumers, and interactions with experience enablers – inanimate entities that provide the consumers with adequate power, means or opportunity to carry out the activities that contribute to their experiences, for example, organizations, facilities, technology, special events, and finance. Second-order interactions are those between the experience enablers and third-order interactions are the internal ones within each experience enabler.

For example, there is the adolescent girl shopping mall experience. An individual girl’s consumer experience in that domain will involve first-order interactions with other consumers (acquainted, such as friends or parents who accompany them to the mall, and unacquainted, such as the boys they meet and “scope”). These are critical interpersonal relationships, whose value and influence is frequently underestimated by service providers. Also important, as first-order interactions, are those with the experience enablers, such as mall operators, retailers within the mall and food-courts, and less obvious ones such as the school, whose year length and day length affect mall experiences, and special events – birthdays, dances – that trigger mall visits. The second-order interactions are those that take place between the experience enablers: in this scenario, those that take place, for example, between the mall management, the retail stores and food-court operators. Third-order

interactions are interactions that exist within these organizations as they impact the consumer experience, e.g. interactions between employees in a retail store.

The additional understanding of interactions from a consumer experience perspective represents important management information. Managerial implications may involve a consideration of second- and third-order consumer interactions in the context of relationship strategy-making, and a rethinking about the co-creation of value propositions. In the B2B literature, it has been argued that suppliers can, and should provide value propositions “by making their

offerings superior on the elements that matter most to target customers”, and that this involves customer value research which requires time, effort, persistence, and some creativity. There are clear parallels in the B2C marketplace. Investigation of consumer networks by CEM has the aim of identifying what matters most, and is of value, to consumers in their own experience domains.

(A précis of the article “Toward an understanding of consumer perspectives on experiences”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)

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