

The ‘customer journey’: Learning from customers in tourism experience encounters

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ABSTRACT

For micro-tourism firms, customers are a readily-accessible and highly important knowledge source that often remains unutilised. This study explores firm–customer encounters along the customer journey as learning opportunities. Based on data collected through participant observations, interviews and a review of user-generated content, this case study provides an in-depth look into the customer journey, with a Swedish micro-tourism firm. The findings suggest that the possibility to generate knowledge about experiential purposes is conditioned by the firm's ability to bestow encounters with an experience-like quality and promote the customers' transformation into participants. This is facilitated by involving customers, adopting an experiential discourse and utilising in-situ supporting moments to socialise. Firms can also learn about customers' subjective perception of value from user-generated content. The study concludes that in the context of learning from customers, small size provides micro-tourism firms with an opportunity to engage in personal relationships with their customers.

1. Introduction

‘Perhaps the most important source of learning is learning from consumers’ (Poon, 1993, p.272). The idea that consumers, users, and customers are a valuable knowledge source for firms resonates through a body of conceptual and empirical works from different theoretical streams. Service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), new service development (Alam, 2002; Matthing, Sandén, & Edvardsson, 2004), open innovation (Brunswick, 2016) and user-driven innovation (Von Hippel, 2005) all advocate involvement of, and learning from, customers. In principle, the notion is that sourcing knowledge from customers about their interests, latent desires and past experiences, has the potential to increase the firm's innovation capacity and enhance the value for their customers.

The customers' role in co-creating tourism experiences makes them a vital knowledge source (Hoarau, 2014; Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011). Tourism firms can learn from customers in different ways, for example, through surveys, interviews, observations and workshops (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager & Nordin, 2011). For small-scale tourism firms these methods are often too demanding and costly (Komppula & Lassila, 2015). Indeed, recent studies have found that small-scale tourism firms rarely utilise customers as sources of knowledge (Pikkemaat & Peters, 2016; Yachin, 2017). This is, arguably, a crucial oversight for the global tourism system, of which, micro-firms

constitute an extensive and vital part (Middleton, 2001; Reinl & Kelliher, 2014; TOURISMlink, 2012). Micro-firms, the smallest type of business entity, employ fewer than ten persons and have an annual turnover of less than €2 million (European Commission, 2014). Micro-tourism firms typically operate within small economic margins and have a limited capacity to innovate (Hjalager, 2002; Müller, 2013). While investments in research and development are beyond their means (Nybakk, Vennesland, Hansen, & Lunnan, 2008; Pikkemaat & Zehrer, 2016), close interactions with tourists are an integral part of their daily operations (Cederholm & Hultman, 2010). Thus, for many micro-tourism firms, customers are a readily-accessible knowledge source that embodies innovation opportunities.

Tourism is a sector in which intensive encounters between customers and service providers constitute the experience (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). These encounters take place along the ‘customer journey’, which involves a pre-trip period, the tourism experience itself and a post-purchase phase (Shaw & Williams, 2009; Voss & Zomerdijk, 2007). The aim of this research is to study firm–customer encounters along the customer journey, as opportunities for micro-tourism firms to learn from customers. In the context of producing tourism experiences, addressing the socio-psychological aspects of value is pivotal (Komppula, 2006; Williams & Soutar, 2009). Accordingly, this research is especially concerned with practices and factors that facilitate knowledge development of the customers' experiential purposes.

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I explore this topic through an interpretivist lens, which constructs knowledge through the researcher's lived experiences and interactions with the subject (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The setting is a micro-tourism firm based in central Sweden. The firm provides nature-based tours in small groups. Presumably, these are rich in relevant data about firm-customer encounters. In the context of micro-tourism firms in Sweden, the purposely selected firm possesses qualities that position it as both a common (representative) and an unusual (relates to customers as a knowledge source) case study. I collected data through participant observations, in-depth interviews with the firm's owner-manager, conversations with the tour guides and review of user-generated content. As a single-case, my purposes with this study are: to illustrate firm-customer communication dynamics along the customer journey; inspire theoretical advancements in tourism experience encounters and knowledge sourcing; and motivate managerial practices that will enable micro-tourism firms to utilise their encounters with the customers, as a knowledge source about experiential purposes.

The article is structured as follows. First, I present the theoretical background, which focuses on customer knowledge, the value it embodies for tourism firms and how it could be sourced. Then, I develop the customer journey model (Fig. 1) and discuss theories relevant to firm-customer encounters. The methodology section motivates the research design, presents the case study and details the data collecting methods. The empirical findings are presented as a report of a customer journey with the studied firm. In the discussion section, I analyse the reported encounters as knowledge sourcing opportunities, identify factors that affect learning from customers and suggest managerial practices that promote the transformation of customers into participants (Fig. 2). I conclude the article with some thoughts that I hope will inspire further research and change in managerial approach.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The value of knowledge and knowledge of value

Knowledge and information are often defined in relation to the 'wisdom hierarchy', in which knowledge is positioned at a higher level (Rowley, 2007). Moving from information to knowledge involves understanding patterns (Bellinger, Castro, & Mills, 2004). Information refers to organised data that are useful and relevant in a certain context (Rowley, 2007). It typically answers questions concerned with 'who', 'what', 'when' and 'how many', while knowledge answers 'how to' questions (Ackoff, 1989). Knowledge provides grounds for action, decision-making and innovation and it is created by the intelligent application of experience and skills on information (Cooper, 2006; Hall & Williams, 2008). The knowledge literature distinguishes between tacit and explicit knowledge (Rowley, 2007). The latter relates to codified knowledge, which is relatively easy to transfer through different types of documents (Weidenfeld, Williams & Butler, 2010). Tacit knowledge, by contrast, involves intangible factors and is embedded in the individual experience, which makes it more difficult to capture (Cooper, 2006; Rowley, 2007).

Customer knowledge refers to the understanding of customer preferences. Utilising customer knowledge is vital for product and service development (Kumar et al., 2010; Tseng, 2009). Understanding tourists' preferences and travel motivations, is essential when creating tourism experiences (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hoarau, 2016; Marrocu & Paci, 2011). Tourists are an important source of knowledge and ideas, and therefore a driver for innovation (Clausen & Madsen, 2014; Williams, 2014). In addition, tourists can also be seen as innovators in their own right, since they build their own itineraries and negotiate the meaning of places and local resources as they imagine new ways to experience a place (Hall & Williams, 2008).

According to the service-dominant (S-D) logic, a firm cannot deliver value but rather design, develop, and offer value propositions (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), which should be based on customers' desires and

perception of value. One of the core axioms of the S-D logic states that 'value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary' (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 19). The notion that value is subjective and vital for service development further stresses the idea that firms should learn from their customers. However, similarly to tacit knowledge, customers' perception of value involves intangible factors. Overcoming the complexity of capturing value in a tourism context requires multidimensional value conceptualisation, such that address both functional and socio-psychological aspects (Williams & Soutar, 2009). Accordingly, Prebensen (2014) adopts a value perspective that consists of four dimensions: *Functional Value* relates to perceived quality and performance in relation to cost; *Emotional Value* relates to the capacity of the experience to generate well-being, excitement and happiness; *Social Value* is derived from one's improved status in a social context and relates to how consumption enhances self-identity and image; *Epistemic Value* is created when the customer gains new knowledge that satisfies his/her curiosity and it is also associated with a sense of adventure. Considering the experiential character of many tourism products, the social, emotional and epistemic dimensions of value might be more decisive in determining the value customers generate (Komppula, 2006).

Helkkula, Kelleher, and Pihlström (2012) argue that the concept of value has not been sufficiently explained in ontological, epistemological and methodological terms. Thus, any analytical, theoretical or practical implications of the S-D logic in relation to sourcing customer knowledge are limited. Helkkula et al. (2012) address these issues and focus on three questions: What is value in the experience? What can be accepted as evidence regarding value in the experience? And: What methods and techniques should be adopted for collecting data about value in the experience? According to Helkkula et al. (2012), value can be created outside of the service context as it can be based on imagination and other people's experiences. These authors claim that subjective experiences are justified as data and evidence of value in experience. Thus, methodological choices should be based on individual narratives (e.g. diaries, blogs and open-ended interview questions), and concerned with the interpretation of human experiences, rather than measurement of pre-defined constructs.

2.2. Knowledge sourcing methods

The question, as to how to source knowledge from tourists, has received some attention in the academic literature. Notably, Hjalager and Nordin (2011) have presented sixteen methods to source ideas and inspiration from customers. Some methods, such as customer surveys, review of complaints and product ratings, collect information from a large number of passive customers. However, such conventional assessment methods are insufficient when it comes to learning about tourists' evaluation of experiences (Park & Vargo, 2012). These methods cannot grasp the complex character of value in experience and therefore they limit the firm's ability to learn about the customers' latent desires. Alternatively, by adopting an interpretive approach, managers could identify possible patterns in the lived experiences of customers (Helkkula et al., 2012). Interpretive methods, such as interviews and observations, are based on close interaction with fewer customers, and aim to understand consumer motivation and behaviour. These methods have the potential to generate valuable knowledge, but they require trained personnel that could analyse qualitative data (Hjalager & Nordin, 2011). Other methods aim to utilise active lead users through open calls for product development, virtual communities and innovation camps. The applicability of these is conditioned by the ability of the firm to facilitate engagement (Hjalager & Nordin, 2011). Elsewhere, Fuchs, Höpken, and Lexhagen (2015) show how customer knowledge could be sourced using a business-intelligence approach and application of web-mining and electronic tracking devices. Konu (2015) found that the Delphi method provides abundant information and ideas from potential customers. Konu and Komppula (2016) add that a customer

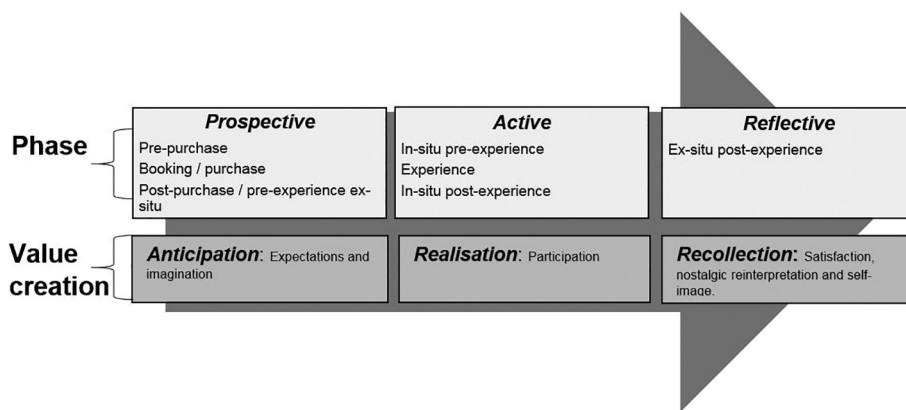


Fig. 1. The customer journey model.

database could be used to target customers for specific feedback. Generally, however, tourism literature discusses knowledge sourcing methods that are presumably beyond the means of micro-tourism firms, which often lack the time, resources or expertise to engage in systematic data collection and analysis.

Edvardsson, Kristensson, Magnusson, and Sundström (2012) introduce an additional dimension to knowledge collection that focuses on the situation and context. Their framework distinguishes whether knowledge is sourced from people who have experienced the service (context), and also whether the information is collected within the boundaries of the service situation or outside these situations. In line with this approach, Komppula and Lassila (2015) study six cases of tourism enterprises. They suggest that methods that are applied in direct connection to the experience, for example, interviews, touch points and ethnography, permit customers to identify their own needs and provide concrete and readily-applicable information. By contrast, they suggest that the use of ex-context methods such as drama and empathy-based stories is most useful for idea generation. Ingram, Caruana, and McCabe (2017) bring forth participative inquiry as a means of sourcing subjective customer knowledge across the *prospective* (before), *active* (during), and *reflective* (after) phases of the total tourism experience. The notion is that each phase provides an opportunity to learn different things about customers. Accordingly, different methods should be applied to source customer knowledge, before, during and after the experience.

Small firms often adopt informal processes to manage knowledge (Hutchinson & Quintas, 2008). However, through continuous interactions with tourists, firms acquire new knowledge that is related to demand (Marrocu & Paci, 2011). Brunswicker (2016) notes that an application-oriented knowledge sourcing strategy, which involves purposively interacting with customers, is especially relevant for small-scale tourism firms, as it allows them to learn about emerging needs and improve the service satisfaction and service experience. Therefore, in the sense of delivering personalised experiences, there is an advantage to being a small firm (Pikkemaat & Zehrer, 2016). For example, tour guides, who come in close contact with customers, become very good at identifying wishes, preferences and interests (Hoarau, 2014). Hence, for small-scale tourism firms, the ability to source customer knowledge depends to a large degree on their absorptive capacity, rather than only systemised methods (Hutchinson & Quintas, 2008; Shaw et al., 2011).

2.3. Encounters along the customer journey

Tourism firms interact with customers along the so-called ‘customer journey’ (Shaw & Williams, 2009; Voss & Zomerdijk, 2007). The journey involves three phases: a prospective pre-trip period phase, an

active tourism experience and a reflective post-trip phase (Ingram et al., 2017; Shaw & Williams, 2009). The journey begins when the customer first develops an interest in the firm’s products and services. The prospective phase involves information search, decision-making and the booking process itself. This phase also includes the time after the experience was booked and before the actual trip. In the prospective phase, the value is embedded in anticipation—the customer dreams about the forthcoming experience, builds expectations and imagines the experience (Kruger & Saayman, 2017; Malone, Mckechnie, & Tynan, 2017). In the active phase, both the customer and the firm are at the same place at the same time. The experience (the core of the activity), is preceded and followed by in-situ transition moments. At this phase, the interactions between the firm and customer are arguably most intense, and value is created through participation. Finally, in the reflective phase, value is created through a recollection of the experience, using a nostalgic reinterpretation of events, satisfaction and enhanced self-image. The model, displayed in Fig. 1, illustrates the three phases of the customer journey and how value is created in each. It is a synthesis of the ideas discussed so far and it will serve as the framework for this study.

Firm–customer encounters along the customer journey are the locus of value-creation and knowledge sourcing. Hence, the character of these encounters determines how and what firms can learn from customers. Sørensen and Jensen (2015) differentiate *service* and *experience* encounters. In the former, firms organise their propositions as standardised and rigid one-way deliveries that are concerned with solving problems, creating functional value and professionally meeting customers’ expectations, which enhances satisfaction. However, tourists often seek experiences (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). Accordingly, tourism firms should organise their propositions to address customers’ latent desires and experiential purposes. These are more difficult to detect and understand than expectations and functional needs. To learn about customers’ experiential purposes requires engaging with them in new types of fuller and deeper communication that focuses on their feelings, emotions and wishes (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). Thus, *experience encounters* are personalised and dynamic interactions, in which front-line employees apply experiential intelligence and flexibility to address customers’ latent desires and purposes (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). In addition, intimate interactions with customers provide opportunities for firms to further learn from their customers and generate rich knowledge that reflects the complexity of tourism experiences and the multiple dimensions in which value is created. Such knowledge is richer than typical satisfaction statements and contributes to a firm’s innovation capacity (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). Table 1 presents the characteristics of tourism *service* and *experience encounters*.

Table 1
 Characteristics of tourism service and experience encounters.
 Adapted from [Sørensen and Jensen \(2015\)](#).

Tourism service encounters	Tourism experience encounters
Rigid	Dynamic
Standardised	Personalised
One-way functional delivery	Co-creation of emotional values
Lack of employee flexibility	Employee flexibility is key
Hyper-professionality	Experiential intelligence
Detached from tourism experience	Situated in integrated tourism experience environment
<i>Develop knowledge about tourist satisfaction</i>	<i>Develop knowledge about tourists' experiential purposes and latent desires</i>
<i>Provides functional value</i>	<i>Enhances the experiential value of the tourist experience</i>

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach and design

The aim of this research is to study firm–customer encounters along the customer journey, as opportunities for micro-tourism firms to learn from customers. I chose to study guided nature tours. These often involve intensive and intimate firm–customer encounters, and are, presumably, rich in relevant data. Firm–customer encounters take place along the customer journey, which is the framework for the data collection. To appropriately address the characteristics of each of the journey's three phases, I collected data using a number of qualitative methods, which I explain below. Throughout my study of encounters along the customer journey, my own background as a tour guide and the insider's view provided by the firm's owner-manager, enabled me to adopt a perspective that comes close to the experience of the tour provider. Moreover, I participated in the journey as a customer thus gaining first-hand experience of the factors that might promote communication. The analysis, therefore, represents my assessment of the information communicated during the observed encounters, and my interpretation of these encounters as learning opportunities.

This is a typical case study in the sense that it was carried out in close interaction with the studied firm's guides and owner-manager, and it deals with practices that are embedded in real management situations ([Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008](#)). According to [Siggelkow \(2007\)](#), the three primary uses for a single-case study are motivation, inspiration and illustration. My purposes are: to illustrate firm–customer communication dynamics along the customer journey; inspire theoretical advancements in tourism experience encounters and knowledge sourcing; and motivate managerial practices that facilitate learning from customers. The purposely selected firm meets the three single-case selection criteria laid down by [Yin \(2014\)](#). First and foremost, guided nature tours in small groups provide an excellent opportunity to study firm–customer encounters. Second, in relation to other nature-based tourism firms in Sweden (see [Fredman & Margaryan, 2014](#)), the firm's size, target market and products make it a representative case. Finally, it is also an unusual case. In a previous study ([Yachin, 2017](#)) the owner-manager of the selected firm was the only participant to refer to customers as a knowledge source. Hence, unlike many micro-tourism firms, this firm demonstrates a concerted effort to learn from customers.

3.2. InSweden

InSweden (pseudonym) was founded in 2003 by a keen traveller, who at the time, had no relevant education or professional experience. By 2017, the firm employed three full-time workers and a few part-time guides. Despite its small size, the firm has established itself over time as one of Sweden's leading actors in wildlife tourism, and is renowned for its quality and popular tours. InSweden's stated business concept is to

create outstanding wildlife tours, away from the typical tourist areas, for like-minded wildlife enthusiasts from all over the world. The firm is based in central Sweden, but it offers tours in many locations around the country. The majority of their customers come from other European countries, and InSweden focuses on introducing them to the Swedish nature and wildlife. As a principle, groups are limited to seven participants per guide. Tour selection ranges from single-day trips up to eight-day trips. Each tour is designed around a different theme, such as bear watching, howling wolves, dog sledging and northern lights expeditions. InSweden operates year-round, but like most nature-based tourism firms in Sweden, July and August are the firm's busiest months. During these months, the moose and beaver day-trip safaris are the firm's most popular tours.

3.3. Data collection

I began my data collection process at the start of July 2017. After booking four tours, I embarked on my own customer journey. Throughout the three phases of the journey, I could reflect on what information and knowledge I, as a customer, communicate, and what cues I react to. Most of the data, however, I collected by studying each phase of the journey separately, using what I perceived as the most appropriate method.

In the active phase, the firm (represented by a tour guide), and the customers are in-situ, i.e. they are at the same place at the same time. To study firm–customer encounters in this phase, I have primarily used participant observations, a method that covers actions in real time and could provide insights into interpersonal behaviours ([Yin, 2014](#)). In July and August 2017, I participated in four tours: a moose safari; a canoe trip; and two beaver safaris (marked as Beaver1 and Beaver2). The tours started at 17:00 and ended sometime between 22:00 and 23:00 at night. In the moose and the second beaver safari, two groups participated in the tour. Most of the time, the groups were separated, each with its own guide. However, we were all together during the introduction, expectations-round and end of the tour. In each tour, a different guide led my group. Besides the guides and me, there were 30 customers in the four tours (collectively), who came from the Netherlands, Switzerland, England, Germany, Sweden and Australia, travelling as families, couples or by themselves. My identity as a tourism researcher was known to the guides and other participants, but the research objective remained undisclosed. As a moderate participant, I was in-situ and occasionally interacted with the guides, but I was primarily an observer ([DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011](#)). During the tours, my focus was on the interactions between the guides and the customers. I was especially attentive to: (1) the information that customers communicated, both verbally and nonverbally; and (2) how the guides constructed the experience-scape, reacted to customer cues and facilitated communication. My own prior personal work experience as a tour guide was useful in 'reading' the customers and understanding the guides' actions. When conditions allowed it, I took field notes, which I completed immediately after each tour. Once all the other customers left, I had a twenty-minute conversation with the guides. We spoke generally about interactions with customers and discussed the tour that has just ended. I was interested to hear how they experienced the tour and whether they had learned something new, or done anything differently. The following morning, I wrote a chronological description of the tour and my observations.

The next step in the data collection process was a meeting with the owner-manager of the firm (henceforth known as David), at the end of August 2017. The meeting lasted nearly four hours and took place in David's home, where he usually conducts office work. Our meeting was recorded using the audio-recording software on my personal computer. David and I engaged in a reflexive review of the customer journey based on my observations (as a customer, a guide and a researcher), and his rich experience as a guide and manager. At this point, my research interest and objectives were explicit and our discussion revolved

Table 2
Data collection.

	Data source	Documentation	Volume
Prospective phase			
Participant observation	Observations	Notes	
Participant observation	Owner-manager interpretation	Recorded and transcribed	90 min
Active phase			
Participant observation	Observations	Field notes, diary	Four tours,(five to six hours each)
Conversational interviewing	Tour guides	Diary	Four conversations of 20 min each
Semi-structured interview	Owner-manager	Recorded and transcribed	40 min
Reflective phase			
Participant observation	Observations	Notes	
Participant observation	Owner-manager interpretation	Voice record	90 min
Content analysis	tripadvisor.com	Extract text	24 reviews

around interactions with customers. At the start, we had discussed the active phase of the customer journey. This part of our meeting was formed as a semi-structured interview, in which I asked David about certain practices I had observed during the four tours. Next, the objectives of our discussion were the prospective and reflective phases of the customer journey. To study these phases, I applied an active participant observation stance (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011), in which I engaged in the firm's (represented by David) interactions with customers. David carried out his usual office tasks: replying to customers' email inquiries, processing booking forms and reading TripAdvisor reviews and customer evaluation forms. This was an opportunity for David to interpret his actions to me and provide an insider's perspective on firm–customer encounters in the prospective and reflective phases of the customer journey.

Customer reviews are a part of the reflective phase of the customer journey. David regularly reads and answers all TripAdvisor reviews of InSweden. TripAdvisor is the leading tourism-related online platform for user-generated content, and is a valid source of data because of its scale and because it is in the public domain (Mkono & Tribe, 2017). All 24 reviews (marked as R1-R24) that were posted in English or Swedish during the 2017 high season (June–September), respectively about a beaver, moose or canoe tour, were included in the study's collected data. Table 2 summarises the data collection process.

3.4. Data analysis

I organised the collected data in a way that reflects the customer journey. The units of analysis were firm–customer encounters along the customer journey. In my analysis, I focused on (1) the character of the encounters, (2) the information and knowledge communicated by customers in these encounters and (3) the factors that stimulated or hindered communication. In the first level of analysis, I studied the observed encounters against Sørensen's and Jensen's (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015) discussion of *service and experience encounters* (Table 1). Secondly, I assessed what customers communicated, explicitly or otherwise, to determine whether it embeds insights about their perception of the different value dimensions (Prebensen, 2014). In addition, I tried to identify the firm's actions that promoted knowledge development about customers' experiential purposes.

3.5. Limitations

This study originates in the perceived importance of learning from customers. Knowledge development, or learning, is manifested over time and it is expressed when changes are implemented. Such longitudinal data collection process was beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, learning is conditioned by one's absorptive capacity (Hoarou, 2014). In this study, I am not interested in assessing the studied population's learning abilities, but rather in exploring encounters with customers as learning opportunities. An additional challenge

derives from the ability to study ex-situ encounters. Except for user-generated content, which is somehow public, most firm–customer communication before and after the active phase, occurs in the private domain and is for this reason difficult to access. In this regard, the possibility to engage in discussion with the firm's owner-manager as he conducts his office work, hence participating in ex-situ encounters with customers, was a unique opportunity to access data, albeit limited, about firm–customer encounters in the prospective and reflective phases.

4. A customer journey 'InSweden'

4.1. The prospective phase

One can learn much about InSweden's tours from its website. Nevertheless, sometimes potential customers contact David prior to booking. Pre-purchase inquiries often regard the possibility to participate in a tour (availability and compatibility). These encounters embed information about demand and could inspire, for example, development of tours for new segments or people with special needs. David rarely has time to engage in phone calls with customers, and so most pre-purchase encounters involve email communication, in which David encourages potential customers to 'use' him in their travel planning. David notes that he invests much time in helping potential customers, because he believes that by doing so, he increases the chances they would eventually book a tour. In addition, from these inquiries, David learns about the potential customers' interests. As an example, he mentions that more and more customers ask him about unique lodgings in Sweden, and as a result, he has now started working on a tour that combines wildlife safaris with lodging in unique hotels.

The booking process takes place at InSweden's website. Customers fill in their details and choice of meal. David notes that he wishes to keep the booking process as simple as possible, and does not want to ask for too much information. A new feature in the booking process invites customers to 'tell something about yourself'. David explains that *'it felt strange to only have a name, nationality and number of people. We were curious to know who they are, why they come and whom they come with'*. David estimates that about half of the customers write something but even when they do, it rarely reveals much about their interests and motivation. *'A common answer will be something like "my girlfriend and I have never been to Sweden before, and we really look forward to seeing a moose", this is not too interesting...'* He adds that so far this feature has been particularly useful in informing on repeat customers, which allows the guides to welcome them in a personalised way.

Once the customers complete the booking process, they receive a confirmation with all the details of the tour. The little communication that happens post-purchase and pre-experience is limited to practical arrangements (such as meeting times). The tours in northern Sweden are more demanding, and thus it is more common for customers to contact David with more detailed questions about what equipment to

bring, and how to get there. David adds that from the questions he understands what customers perceive as barriers. Subsequently, based on this information, he is in a position to adjust the tours from season to season.

4.2. The active phase

Moose and beavers are typically active at dusk. Accordingly, the safaris start late in the afternoon. In the active phase of the journey, customers and firm are in-situ, interacting face-to-face. Although the tours I participated in had different themes, they followed a similar 'blueprint' that is the sequence of moments that constitute the active phase. Once all the customers were present, the guide welcomed us. In this 'icebreaking' moment customers had the opportunity to present themselves, tell about their trip in Sweden (where they have been and where they will go from here), and about their relation to nature-based activities. Many of InSweden tours involve transportation. In the moose and beaver tours, we met outside a local eco-lodge, and from there travelled together for about twenty minutes to the tour's starting point. Seemingly, the minivan ride embodies an opportunity to source customer knowledge, although in the tours, the guides did not facilitate a conversation, and the customers were mostly quiet.

The next moment, which David referred to as the 'expectations-round', was especially relevant for the aim of this study. We sat together around a table by a lake. The guide passed around an item (a log with beaver bite marks or a moose antler), and everybody was asked to say something about themselves and what they expect from the tour. The purpose, according to David, is to give the guide a better idea of the group (who everyone is, why they joined the tour and what they are interested in), but also to set an explicit goal, which the guide can relate to at the end of the tour. The following are excerpts from my notes:

'Once we have arrived at the starting point of the tour, the guide had us all sitting at a table... this is a part of all InSweden tours. It really seems like a good initiative and an excellent way to give voice to the customers. However, customers were really reserved and none of them cared to share too much of their own experience or ideas. I wonder if the guide could have created a more inviting atmosphere.' (Beaver1 safari)

'Around the table, customers, in their turn, said what they expect from the day. Answers were varied. For most, the beaver safari was something to do while in Sweden and not the main travel motivation. We also learned about the guests' background and plans. The guide was gently asking leading questions like "where are you staying" or "how did you find InSweden". These are simple questions, but they really got the guests talking and sharing information which could be valuable.' (Beaver2 safari)

'We were sitting by a small lake, it rained a bit but nothing that bothered us. It was very peaceful. We sat on wooden benches in a square, it was a good set-up. Maybe because there were no children or maybe because the setting was more natural, it felt like the customers were more open and willing to share their expectations and other information about themselves, their hobbies and past experiences.' (Moose safari)

As far as firm–customer encounters in the active phase go, the 'expectations-round' is probably the outstanding moments for sourcing customer knowledge. For once, the focus is on the customers and not on the guide. Nevertheless, in the four tours, customer expectations were modest and these individuals were content with, for example, *'seeing a moose would be nice'*, *'would be so cool to see a beaver chewing on something'*, *'I want to learn about Swedish wildlife'* or *'to have a nice evening and meet people from different countries'*.

Once the item (i.e. a log with beaver bite marks or a moose antler), has circled around and returned to the guide's hands, he briefed us on the upcoming activity. This moment included also an introduction to Swedish nature and wildlife. We then proceeded to the 'experience'. This is the core of the tour and the longest moment in the active phase

of the customer journey. The majority of the experience we spent driving slowly along the forest's outskirts (moose safari), paddling on the lake (canoe tour) or cruising down the river in a small electric boat (beaver safari). Wildlife experiences require quiet and respect for the animals. The guides encouraged us not to make any noise and enjoy the silence. During the 'experience', we focused on canoeing and on looking for, and at, the animals. Although this was an intense and intimate moment shared by guide and customers, verbal communication was scarce. I do not suggest the guides did not learn from the customers. 'Reading' customers is an essential skill for a guide. In the tours, the proximity to the group allowed the guides to closely observe our actions and, potentially, interpret how we experience the activity. During the activities, we also had a few breaks, in which we had the opportunity to speak. In the beaver tours, at the furthest point away from where we had started our trip, we went on land and observed a beaver lodge from up close. In the moose safari, we felt free to speak when we drove from one forest to another. During the canoe tour, the guide occasionally signalled us to come together, so he could point out something or communicate how we should proceed. However, immersed in the activities, during these breaks customers only spoke about what was happening at that moment.

In the moose safari, we were introduced to Swedish nature in a 40-min walk in the forest. This moment was free of the intensity and focus that characterised the core activities. During this walk, customers conversed freely among themselves and with the guide. Conversations were, again, mainly in the context of the tour but the customers also shared experiences from their previous travels.

All InSweden tours include a meal made from locally-grown organic ingredients. *'Eating together is an important part of the whole experience'* notes David. The set-up was different on each of the tours. The outstanding meal experience, in my opinion, was provided during the canoe tour:

'We parked the canoes and went on the Island. David taught us how to make a fire in the wild without matches. He let us try ourselves, which was a lot of fun. We all worked together preparing for dinner. Then we sat by the fire and grilled hot dogs using sticks we made ourselves. Around the fire, we ate and talked. Some were talking about their experiences in Sweden and other places they have visited. There was also an interesting discussion about using different mobile apps when travelling.' (Canoe tour)

What distinguishes that meal experience is that David, who was our guide, involved the customers in the preparations for the meal. We were engaged. By comparison, in the other tours, the guides took care of everything. A few customers did offer to help, but the guide replied *'It's on me, relax, you are on vacation'*. Another difference was that while on the canoe tour, we stopped for food after we paddled for some time, thus we had time to become a group. In contrast, during the beaver safaris, meals were a part of the sequence that included the expectations-round and briefing.

Eating together, let alone by a campfire, created an atmosphere that facilitated conversations. During the meals, the guides were the centre of attention. They told us stories about wild-life adventures, and did their best to answer the many questions customers had. Dinners were not stressful and we had plenty of time to talk. Customers, I noticed, spoke about themselves more when talking to the guide in private, or to another customer, than when the whole group was sitting together.

At the end of the tours, the guides gathered the group to summarise the tour. This, as David relates, is a practice they started this season:

'We never had a real ending to the tours and it bothered me. I would have liked a place where we could sit by a campfire, have a warm drink and talk, but it gets too late. We had to find a way to get the customers out of the van (in the moose safari) to round-up the tour and get some feedback. So we made these giveaway postcards with some fun facts about the animals and on how to keep in touch with us.' (David)

The guides reminded us of our expectations and asked for feedback. The tours ended late, after 22:00. Swedish nights, even in the summer, get cold. It is therefore not surprising that customers were reluctant to elaborate much on their experiences. Feedback was limited to statements such as *'it was magical!'*, *'I can't believe how big the moose are'* and *'I think we saw at least ten beavers'*. This in-situ post-experience moment also serves as a preparation for the reflective phase of the customer journey. Our guides informed us that in the coming days we will receive an evaluation form. They stressed how much our opinion matters to them and that they really try to improve for every year.

4.3. The reflective phase

The morning after an InSweden tour, customers receive an email with an evaluation form asking them to *'tell us what you think about the tour...and be honest'*. More specifically, customers were asked to rate the tour, the food, the lodging and the wildlife experience. InSweden also asks for ideas on how to improve the tour, why customers chose this tour and how they learned about it. InSweden has collected over 500 forms in the last four years. *'Most of the time I just get positive answers, like "don't change anything", which is not really what I am after'* notes David. However, he adds that the evaluation forms definitely helped him to improve the tours over the years.

David and I read a recently submitted evaluation form. As a recommendation, the customer wrote that *'my daughter was very tired at the end, maybe we could have ended earlier'*. David nods, he explains that it is a challenge because wildlife sighting chances are better late in the evening. He adds that such comments were more common before. Consequently, David now encourages guides to dare and finish the tours earlier even if it means seeing fewer animals. In addition, he notes, the comment suggests that it is important that the guides communicate their decisions to customers and explain why they were late. Another evaluation form mentions the warm blankets and professional binoculars they had in the beaver safari. David then tells me that they did not have these until two years ago. When they noticed customers often complain in the forms that they were cold on the boat, David's partner suggested the simple, yet practical, blanket solution. Similarly, binoculars for each customer was an idea that emerged out of an evaluation form, in which a customer had simply stated he wished he had binoculars when the big moose was around.

In InSweden's case, post-experience firm–customer encounters over social media occur, but are not common. Some customers do, however, post reviews on tripadvisor.com. David replies to all reviews, thanking the customers and inviting them to join the tours again. The reviews we read together were very positive. For David, it seemed, they were a confirmation that the tours work well in their new format. The sampled reviews of InSweden were primarily concerned with describing the tours and counting wildlife sighting. Some customers, however, shared their subjective experiences, from which it is possible to learn about the individual sense-making of value. It appears that customers especially appreciate the guides' personal attention, learning about Swedish nature and the feeling of doing something novel. The following are excerpts from the sampled TripAdvisor reviews, which are concerned with socio-psychological aspects of value:

'The whole evening felt off the beaten path' (R20, Moose safari)

'This was a unique experience and the guides had never seen this before in fifteen years. We were privileged and buzzing for hours..... I can't thank them all enough for the way they involved my son, the experiences and knowledge they shared with him and the kindness they showed him. They went way beyond just being guides' (R14, Beaver & Moose safaris)

'The guides were so passionate about what they do, and were full of knowledge that they were willing to share... I had learnt a great deal about Swedish wildlife and the forest' (R24, Moose safari)

'I was both excited and very relaxed after the beaver safari, such a good

combination!' (R22, Beaver safari)

A fair number of customers revisit InSweden, generating further firm–customer encounters. I did not, however, study these. For the purpose of this study, posted reviews on tripadvisor.com are considered to be the end of the customer journey. The following section looks at the reported encounters as knowledge sourcing opportunities and discusses the factors that affect learning from customers.

5. 'We want to know more'

In this section, I analyse the reported encounters as learning opportunities. My discussion of factors that affect learning from customers is organised around two theoretical themes: the discourse used by the firm and the respective roles firms and customers assume in their encounters along the customer journey. The section ends with a model that suggests managerial practices to promote the transformation of customers into participants (Fig. 2).

5.1. Imagining experiential purposes

One of the guiding suppositions of this study is that tourism firms' value propositions, should derive from knowledge about customers' experiential purposes, and socio-psychological aspects of value. I selected to study InSweden because they are explicitly interested in learning from customers. In the presented customer journey, there are four moments that were purposely designed to learn from customers: the booking process; the expectations-round; the end of the tour; and the evaluation forms. Customers are invited to share their expectations and opinions before, during and after the tour. However, their answers are typically laconic and lack meaningful insights about value and desires. Notably, the evaluation forms, which are collected in the reflective phase, contribute to product development and incremental changes in practices. The forms are designed to communicate coded explicit information, and are primarily concerned with functional value. Hence, evaluation forms are useful in learning about customer satisfaction, and about how well the tour's different components work. Nevertheless, evaluation forms are an assessment tool, and as such, fail to grasp customers' perception of phenomenological value (Park & Vargo, 2012), and provide little in relation to the emotional, social and epistemic value dimensions; or as David noted in frustration when we read another positive yet uninformative evaluation form *'we want to know more'*.

According to the service-experience dichotomy (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015), knowledge, of customers' experiential purposes is developed in dynamic and personalised *experience* encounters. Thus, the ex-situ moments (booking and evaluation forms), albeit the personal language used, lack the capacity to facilitate a creative communication of feelings, wishes and possibilities. Presumably, InSweden's in-situ encounters with customers, qualify for what Sørensen and Jensen (2015) call *experience* encounters. The expectations-round and end-of-the-tour discussions are carried in small groups, in which customers get personal attention and have time to express themselves. Supposedly, the conditions on late chilly Swedish evenings discouraged customers from engaging in rich communication at the end of the tours. But, also the expectations-rounds, which were carried prior to the activities, generated little in terms of knowledge about customer experiential purposes. The reason might be that expectations reflect a standard and are influenced by cultural and institutional factors (Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014). Asking customers about their expectations bounds the discussion to functional attributes. Thus, from the expectation rounds, we learned that, unsurprisingly, customers expect to see a moose on a moose safari and be out in nature on a nature-based tour.

In contrast, we learned little about how to generate emotional, social or epistemic value. Helkkula et al. (2012) noted that value can be imagined. Imagining pertains to what an individual hopes for. It differs

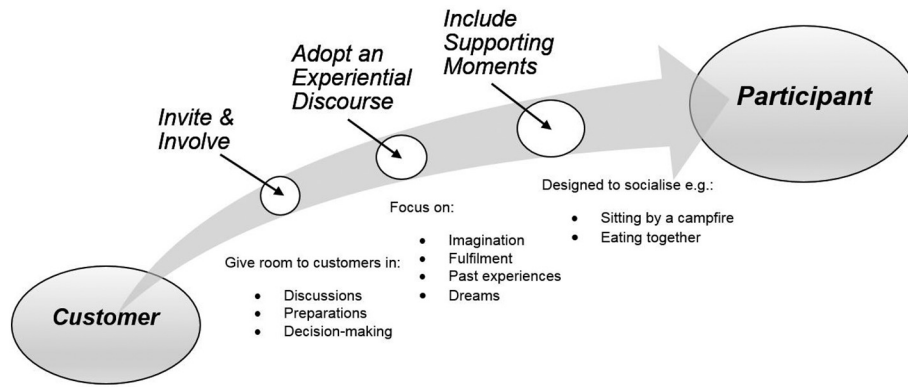


Fig. 2. Customer transformation model.

from expectations in the sense that imagining is not influenced by quality standards but rather embodies latent desires. A fundamental argument of the S-D logic is that value, which is co-created, is the purpose of exchange (service). In the context of tourism, which is mostly an experience intensive sector, hedonic consumption and experiential dreams are the purposes of exchange. Consequently, real value for tourists does not derive from perceived quality or satisfaction, but from fulfilling latent desires. Fulfilment is achieved when an emotional, social or epistemic value is created. Unlike satisfaction, fulfilment is not temporary but rather resides in the individual's ability to recollect the experience. Thus, in the context of hedonic tourism activities, adopting a discourse that focuses on what customers imagine, rather than expect, might elicit meaningful insights about their experiential purposes.

5.2. Performing roles: guides, customers, participants and reviewers-diarists

Another factor that might have hindered individuals in my study from elaborating freely on their desires, is the position they assumed in their encounters with the firm. Being a consumer is one of the contemporary dominant forms of human subjectivity (Firat & Dholakia, 2017). The customers in the tours came from affluent societies and are cultured customers in the sense that they are accustomed to commercial exchanges in service encounters. Thus, in their interactions with the guides, some presumably acted according to certain social norms that left their desires latent. The guide's ambition should be to facilitate customer involvement (Zátori, 2016). Interactions in which the guides invited customers to assume an active role and partake in decision-making, were imparted with an *experience*-like quality, and a feeling of a unique adventure, rather than a standard and scripted tour. This was especially noticeable on the canoe tour, when David assigned customers with duties (for example carry canoes and set the dinner table) that transformed us into active participants.

Tour guides carry an instrumental role in delivering tourism experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Cohen, Ifergan, & Cohen, 2002). As experts, the guides were the protagonists of the active phase. Most communication revolved around the guides' knowledge and experience, leaving little room for customers to express their thoughts. I do not suggest that guides should hold back from sharing their knowledge since mediation from their part enhances the value of the experience (Hansen & Mossberg, 2017). The critical issue is, therefore, when and how to engage with customers in a communication that is concerned with the latter's emotions and wishes (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). The core activities are intense and deserve the guide's and customers' full attention. However, the active phase of the customer journey also includes in-situ supporting moments. Transportation and mealtimes, for example, provide applicable opportunities to source customer knowledge. Campfires, in particular, seem to bestow intimacy and ignite meaningful conversations. Time, of course, is also a factor. In an after-

tour conversation, one guide noted that he likes the multi-day tours better, because in those customers open up, and he really gets to know them. He adds that when there is more time for conversations, he does not feel a need to *'tell them everything I know at once'*. Thus, the challenging task of tour guides is to turn *service* encounters into *experience* ones, and to turn customers into participants within a limited time without compromising their roles as mediators, storytellers and instructors.

The influence of the role that the customers assume on the information they communicate, is also evident in the reflective phase. People who post on tripadvisor.com are members of an online community, who share their travel experiences with fellow-travellers (Baka, 2016). In their brief autobiographies, trip-advisors articulate an account of their adventures that unpacks perceptions and meanings (Wilson, 2012). Thus, at this moment, at the end of the journey, customers become reviewers-diarists. The sampled reviews of InSweden were mostly concerned with factual information and reflected the knowledge already available from the evaluation forms. However, in their new role, some reviewers-diarists voluntarily reported on their subjective experiences. These individual narratives are justified as data (Helkkula et al., 2012), allowing entrepreneurs to improve their services (Pikkemaat & Zehrer, 2016). The information in the sampled reviews can, for example, encourage InSweden to explore what makes customers feel excited and relaxed, build-up on the tours' educational qualities and make every tour seem exclusive. Hence, on top of being means for showcasing customer satisfaction (Thomas, Shaw, & Page, 2011), and managing reputation (Baka, 2016), user-generated content, such as TripAdvisor reviews, is an opportunity for tourism firms to learn what parts of their service generate social, emotional and epistemic value for customers.

5.3. From customer to participant

For micro-tourism firms, learning from customers about their experiential purposes is conditioned by their ability to engage with the customers in meaningful ways that facilitate the transformation of customers into participants. Designing value propositions as experience encounters require employee flexibility and experiential intelligence (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). The findings of this study supplement this notion by identifying some managerial practices that could promote the transformation of customers into participants. These are: to invite, involve, and give room for customers; adopt an experiential discourse, and; include supporting moments that are designed to allow customers to socialise with the guides. It is important to note that these practices are facilitators and not sequential stages. The transformation from a customer into a participant happens gradually over time, and through intimate encounters. The customer transformation model (Fig. 2) illustrates the transformation from a customer to a participant as a journey that is promoted by the suggested practices.

I based this model on the observations I made during the active phase of the customer journey. Nevertheless, firms could possibly benefit from implementing the suggested practices in ex-situ encounters as well. Social media, in particular, provide opportunities to involve customers (or potential customers), in the firm's activity. By sharing information, knowledge or content, and by inviting customers to generate their own content, micro-tourism firms could utilise social media platforms to generate anticipation, promote nostalgic reinterpretation and enhance customers' self-image.

6. Final thoughts

This study originated in the notion that, for micro-tourism firms, customers are a readily-accessible and highly important knowledge source that often remains unused. My aim was to study firm–customer encounters as opportunities to learn from customers. Considering the hedonistic character of tourism activities, I was especially interested in practices and factors that facilitate knowledge development of customers' experiential purposes and perception of socio-psychological value. The findings, in accordance with Sørensen and Jensen (2015), suggest that the possibility to utilise firm–customer encounters as learning opportunities, is conditioned by the firm's ability to involve customers and bestow an experience-like quality to the customer journey. A fundamental factor in this regard is the respective roles that the firm and customers assume in these encounters. In an attempt to appear more professional, micro-tourism firms may opt for a conventional service approach, which is concerned with customers' expectations and satisfaction. Instead, I argue, when interacting with customers, micro-tourism firms should embrace the hobbyist character of a small-scale operation. Such an approach enables personal relationships with customers and facilitates a discourse of imagining and fulfilment. Thus, for micro-tourism firms, the key to learning about customers' experiential purposes lies in their ability to engage with customers in ways that will motivate them to abandon their positions as customers and assume the role of participants. The customer transformation model (Fig. 2) illustrates this proposition. Further research could focus on unpacking the dynamics of customer transformation into a participant from the perspective of customers. The customer journey model (Fig. 1) embodies an additional theoretical contribution. The model illustrates the customer journey with regard to the creation of value in each phase. It provides a framework for an empirical investigation of different aspects of tourism experience encounters, such as knowledge generation and value co-creation.

In the active phase, firm–customer encounters are intimate, intense and last over an extended period of time. The active phase constitutes the core of the customer journey and accordingly, received the majority of attention in this paper. Nevertheless, the sampled TripAdvisor reviews indicate that ex-situ encounters are also opportunities to learn about customers' experiential purposes. This notion puts forward an invitation for future research on communication between micro-tourism firms and customers, especially over social media and online platforms.

On a final note, it is impossible to reduce encounters and social interactions to a small number of factors. Thus, studying encounters is a very complex task. More so, when the study is concerned with learning, which is manifested over time and is influenced by personal abilities and context. Nevertheless, from a tourism management perspective, the propositions laid in this article could motivate micro-tourism firms to approach encounters with customers in ways that seek to learn about customers' experiential purposes and design their value propositions accordingly.

Declarations of interest

None.

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