Emotional Elements as Part of the Digital Tourism Experience

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Abstract: Digital tools and platforms are often considered to improve customer experiences. Especially during the pandemic, businesses engaged with digital tools, e.g., marketing, sales, communication and experience creation. However, using digital solutions is often considered to solve all the challenges and problems, and the emotional and human touch needs to be remembered. With the requirements of multi-channelled communication, customer encounters are becoming more and more challenging. Technical excellence is not enough, but understanding customer behaviour and emotions is crucial. The age of the customer challenges companies to create experiential digital services instead of mere efficiency. Digital customer experience includes value proposition, human-centred innovation, and experiences (Tussyadiah 2014) along all the touch points of the digital customer journey (Zomerdijk & Voss 2010). These can be analysed with the sensorial, emotional and behavioural dimensions of Gentile et al. (2007) to understand the elements that create a customer experience. Gentile et al. (2007) also noticed that customer involvement and commitment were more substantial if several dimensions were present in the service. This paper studies the emotional customer responses to one webpage to determine the triggers creating emotions and thus resulting in actions. Laboratory experiments and thematic interviews were used as a method to help to form digital tourism experiences better. As a result, it can be stated that there is much to do to create positive emotional effects instead of frustration and anger. The study showed that even the pragmatic dimension failed in customer experience, and the sensorial dimension settled with vision. Even though this study functioned as a pilot for future research, it provided insights to the companies and increased the understanding of applying Gentile's dimensions of customer experience. While the tourism and hospitality industry is considered an experienced business, adding all the customer experience dimensions to the online channels and communication is recommended to increase customer involvement and, thus, customer loyalty.

Keywords: Digital tools, Webpages, Customer experience, Tourism service, Emotions

1. Introduction

How often have you felt frustrated when the web pages keep loading, or the company does not answer your email inquiry? Or have you ever searched for contact information or purchasing possibility online in vain? Digitalisation increased and developed during Covid-19, but it also created industry challenges. Especially tourism industry had to weigh its competence and knowledge more carefully when multi-channelled customer and purchasing behaviour increased, and the customer became more demanding. There was an increased need for mere technical capability or being online when an enhanced understanding of customers and customer care were required even online.

The more practical design of customer experience increases customer competitiveness, lowers costs, increases efficiency, and motivates the personnel (Johnston & Kong 2011). Tussyadiah (2014) has found three aspects of design: aesthetic emphasising the value proposition of services, interpretation emphasising the human-centred innovation, and the third emphasising the process of developing the experience- (and customer) centric services. Zomerdijk and Voss (2010) point out that experiences are created in the digital and physical touchpoints along the customer. Gentile et al. (2007) have added six dimensions to the customer experience. In this paper, especially the emotional, sensorial and behavioural dimensions are studied. The emotional dimension of customer experience is especially worth exploring – not only from the technical functionality perspective but also by discovering which elements cause specific emotions and the responses and actions they create.

This paper focuses on one touchpoint, webpages, and tries to discover what elements on pages have triggered certain emotions. The purpose is to deepen the understanding of the triggers creating certain emotions and responses online, thus helping to understand tourism products' formation more closely.

2. Tourism Experience

Today, the customer's path is filled with digital and physical encounters in the tourism and hospitality industry. Encounter points between the company and the customer are the homepage, social media channels and various platforms, such as courier services or OTA channels (online travel agencies). Customer service and purchasing are also increasingly dependent only on digital channels – sometimes even digital bots.

Digital encounters can be utterly online touch points with the customer and on-site. Various digital screens, QR codes, and AR and MR implementations are examples of digital encounters in the physical environment. These multiple encounters at different stages of the customer's path ultimately make up the customer experience.

2.1 Composition of an Experiential Tourism Product in General

Services, products (e.g. Kotler et al. 1999), organisational culture (e.g. Hofstede 2001) or research methods in experiences can be described by the so-called onion model. Nested circles – the layers of the onion – can be used to illustrate core competence, stakeholders or supporting services. The tourism industry has used the model to describe the tourism product (Komppula & Boxberg 2002).

The product consists of several factors in the customer's mind, as Figure 1 illustrates. Tourists often consider, for example, a trip to Lahti or Phuket as a single tourism product (Komppula & Boxberg 2002). Depending on the destination, the customer has a different image and experience of how information search, reservations and payments are handled. The experience of booking accommodation using the contact form or on Booking.com can be very different depending on the customer, their technical skills and, of course, the function and layout of the channel. Technology brings together diverse stakeholders in the tourism industry even more (Buhalis 2020). Smooth technological solutions can, at best, exceed expectations and be the distinguishing factor from competitors.

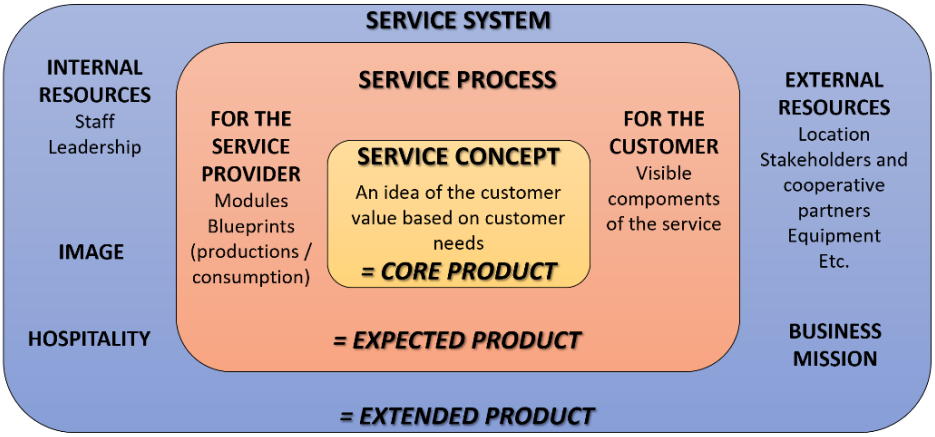

Figure 1: Customer-Oriented Tourism Products (Adapted From (Komppula & Boxberg 2002).

However, the onion model is essentially a very structured way of describing the travel service, which is essentially the subjective experience of each customer. Although hospitality and image are highlighted in the model, there is no mention of emotional or customer experience, a common phenomenon in tourism research (Scuttari & Pechlaner 2017). Also, the importance of digital has remained mainly at the level of tools.

2.2 Elements of Digital Customer Experience

Customer experience online is essentially related to user experience, also called UX. User experience covers all aspects of the interaction between the user and the product or service (Jang & Han 2022). It can also be defined as a person's perceptions and reactions due to the use and anticipated use of a product, system or service (Law et al. 2009). It can be seen as apparent connections to the service system Komppula and Boxberg's (2002) model. If you look at the elements of digital customer experience and user experience, you can notice similarities.

Rose et al. (2011) describes the formation of the customer experience with a model (Figure 2) in which an experience is formed based on the customer's expectations, which has consequences for customer satisfaction and repeat purchases. This model can also be looked at from the user experience perspective (Jang & Han 2022) and get more detailed information about what affects the experience. E.g., Mihaijlovic (2014) and Neuhofer et al. (2014) have stated that digitality - and its functionality - is a critical element in creating an experience.

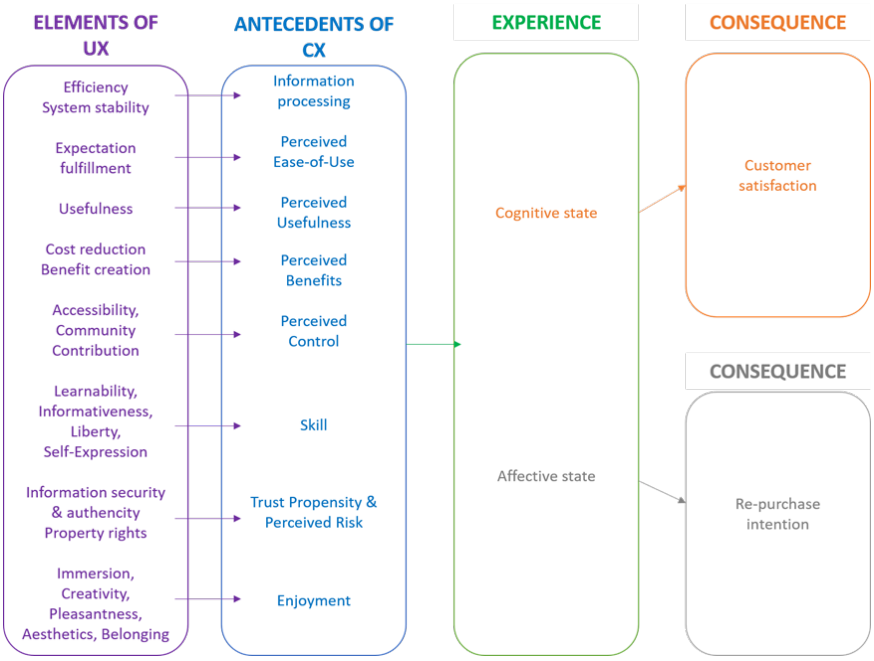

Figure 2: User Experience (UX) and Customer Experience (CX) Combined (According to (Rose et al. 2011; Jang & Han 2022)

However, exemplary technical implementation alone does not guarantee a good customer experience. Even if a chatbot or reservation system works technically, it may still not know how to listen to the customer and consider his needs. The most typical targets of failure are speed, ease combined with findability, the attitude and competence of the service provider, reliability and enjoyment (Zeithaml et al. 2013), which are essentially related to the service process section of Komppula and Boxberg's (2002) model. The value produced by the service for the customer, and with it the effectiveness of the customer experience, largely depends on the tangible or emotional benefits (Immonen et al. 2018) that the customer feels they will receive during the core product of the service mentioned by Komppula and Boxberg (2002). These benefits largely depend on how committed the customer feels to the service and the service process (Ge 2014). Generally, the elements of an excellent digital service are almost the same as those of a physical service situation; the environment changes (Heinonen & Pesonen 2022).

The theory of customer experience by Gentile et al. (2007) suggests that customer experience results from all customer interactions with a company, including the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages. According to this theory, the customer experience is influenced by the customer's expectations, perceptions, and emotions at each step of the customer journey (Gentile et al., 2007; de Keyser et al., 2020). In the model by Gentile et al. (2007), the customer experience is further broken down into several elements, including sensorial, emotional, and behavioural. The sensorial elements refer to the physical sensations that a customer experiences while interacting with a company, such as sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. The emotional elements refer to the feelings and emotions a customer experiences, such as pleasure, satisfaction, or frustration. Behavioural elements refer to the actions a customer takes due to their experiences, such as making a purchase or returning for additional products or services.

Both Gentile's theory (2007) and Komppula's model (2002) highlight the importance of considering the customer's expectations and perceptions. Gentile's theory emphasises the influence of the customer's expectations, perceptions, and emotions on the customer experience. At the same time, Komppula's model identifies customer expectations as one of the levels of service experience elements. Gentile's theory focuses on the customer experience, while Komppula's model looks at the service product and the various elements that make it up. Additionally, Gentile's approach strongly emphasises the customer's expectations, perceptions, and emotions. At the same time, Komppula's model focuses more on the various components that make up the service product and how they contribute to the customer experience.

By combining these two views and regarding elements of customer experience and service from versatile angles (Figure 3), valuable information can be gathered for improving service, value creation and overall customer experience.

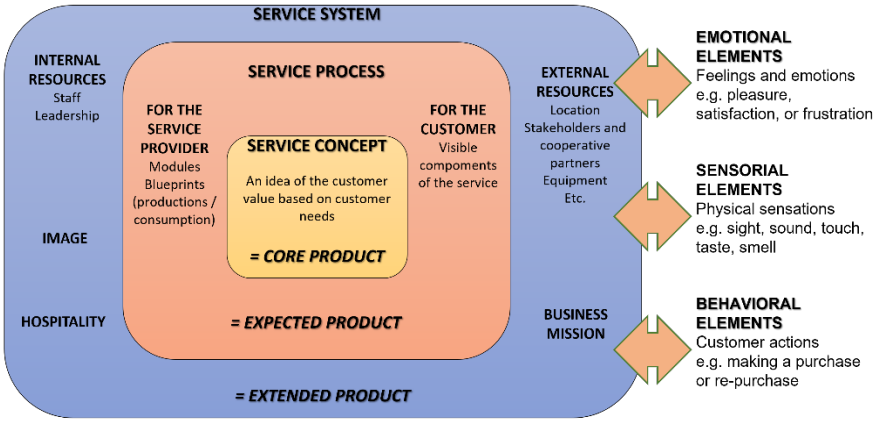

Figure 3: Customer-Oriented Tourism Products Added With CX Elements (Adapted From (Komppula & Boxberg 2002 and Gentile et al. 2007)

2.3 Digital Customer Experience as Emotion

Most of our purchase decisions are made subconsciously based on our emotions. Especially in tourism, which is based on experiences, the importance of emotions in marketing and buying is critical. That is why it is essential to understand the customer's feelings to predict his behaviour. (Shaw 2018.)

The study of emotions in the digital context has primarily focused on the functionality of online shopping and customer satisfaction. However, a deeper understanding of customer emotions and their long-term effects could be in order. For example, customer satisfaction can be considered a combination of many positive emotions instead of one influencing emotion. (Shaw 2018.)

Emotions can be divided in different ways (e.g. Plutchik 1980; Kollareth et al. 2020). The most commonly used of these is Plutchik's wheel of emotions, where several variations have been added to the basic emotions, and new emotions have been created. Emotions arise from different triggers, which can be compared to the primary factors in. These feelings occur either inside a person based on his expectations and previous experiences or externally from the service provider and the service environment. (Shaw 2012).

In a digital environment, emotional experiences are created by the layout, images, text, communities, online shopping and its functionality, and customer treatment (e.g. Piazza et al. 2019; Cherbonnier & Michinov 2022). Different emotions, in turn, cause other actions.

In general, happiness and joy have been considered positive emotions that cause, for example, customer satisfaction and a purchase decision, while sadness and disappointment cause withdrawal (Nawijn & Biran 2019). Amusing humour creates flexibility and can be used to solve problems (Griskevicius et al. 2015). The feeling of caring strengthens the (customer) relationship and creates closeness (Gonzaga et al. 2001).

Positive emotions benefit the company leading to purchases and satisfaction but also increased customer loyalty (Wu & Gao 2019) and a desire to share good experiences with others (Nikolinakou & King 2018).

A smile is often associated with joy, although it can mask real feelings or be inauthentic (Schmidt & Cohn 2001). In face coding and human-computer interaction research, a smile is associated with joy and satisfaction. A smile is recognised by raising the cheekbones and corners of the lips. (An et al. 2015.) On the contrary, sadness, anxiety and frustration appear as furrowed brows and muttering of the mouth.

According to facial research, a state of fear can be distinguished by a widened, staring, frozen gaze. To a large extent, the same signs also apply to feelings of anger (Carroll & Russell 1996). On the other hand, disgust and frustration can be recognised by the nose's twitching and the mouth's purring. Sadness is often expressed by raising the cheeks and opening the mouth slightly, and in surprise, the mouth and eyes are open, and the cheeks are raised. (Du et al. 2014.)

3. The "User Walk" Experiment

3.1 Methodology

A user walk experiment was conducted in June 2022. A user walk, or walkthrough, is a valuable way to study how facilities work from the perspective of users and customers. For example, the method has been used in

developing teaching facilities (Sandström & Nevgi n.d.) or in the design of hospitals (Suri 2003). The walkthrough method gathers data while the test person engages with an online interface or screens according to tasks given to him (Light et al. 2018). The method is used to conduct detailed analysis to identify points of interest that may be crucial in customer experience (Bligård & Osvalder 2013). It provides data on how users interact with an interface, its functionalities, and usability, i.e., provides insights into user behaviour and can be used in further design and development processes (Lewis et al. 1990).

To enhance and ensure the quality of responses, thematic interviews with the testers followed the walkthrough method. This aimed to get in-depth insights and perspectives on that topic (e.g., Morgan 1997).

This experiment was twofold. The first part was conducted in the sales and marketing laboratory of Turku University of Applied Sciences over two days as part of the e-Hospitality project. The investigation aimed to test the renewal of the new Visit Naantali website, how easy it is to use, and what feelings the pages evoke. The use of the website was monitored for eye movements, facial expressions, and the skin's electrical conductivity. The iMotions program was used to analyse facial expressions.

The testers were given two tasks. The first was to book accommodation for the summer of 2022 in Naantali. The second was to book an activity of their choice. The reservations were not completed, but the tasks ended before the personal or payment details were filled in. The tester was given a maximum of five minutes to complete an individual task.

The second part included a follow-up interview to discuss the experiences and to get oral feedback on the test. Focus groups included two to four participants to allow everyone to express their thoughts about the experiment. Group interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews lasted 20-45 minutes. Each interview had the same facilitator, who had not seen the tested website or participated in the experiment. The facilitator started the interview with an initial question to encourage thematic discussion.

These two parts were compared and reflected towards the customer experience theory and how different parts of service product affect and are affected in the case of a webpage.

3.2 Findings

A total of 23 people (Table 1) participated in the test, of which the majority (18) were women. After each task, the tester had to rate the ease of that task on a scale of 1–10, where one meant challenging, and ten was easy. Generally, booking accommodation was perceived as easier than booking an activity. Only four testers gave a full ten to either one or both tasks. On average, the ease of tasks was perceived as 6.8 for accommodation and 6.3 for activities.

Table 1: Basic Information of Testers

Tester number	Gender	Ease-of-use in accommodation task	Ease-of-use in activity task	Time spent on accommodation task (min)	Time spent on activity task (min)
1	Female	9	8	1,92	2,42
2	Female	9	7	2,54	3,96
3	Female	6	2	1,99	3,13
4	Female	6	4	2,33	1,96
5	Female	4	4	3,32	3,02
6	Female	9	8	3,55	3,02
7	Female	10	10	1,55	1,35
8	Male	4	6	1,24	1,18
9	Male	10	10	1,84	1,56
10	Female	9	10	2,17	1,49
11	Male	6	3	2,00	1,56
12	Female	8	7	2,29	1,75
13	Female	5	2	1,49	2,41

Tester number	Gender	Ease-of-use in accommodation task	Ease-of-use in activity task	Time spent on accommodation task (min)	Time spent on activity task (min)
14	Female	3	9	4,59	2,03
15	Female	3	9	5,00	1,67
16	Female	9	2	4,38	3,27
17	Female	4	8	2,29	1,75
18	Female	8	9	3,82	4,84
19	Female	8	4	3,13	4,15
20	Female	5	5	5,00	1,58
21	Male	10	10	0,90	0,78
22	Female	7	4	4,59	4,52
23	Male	4	4	4,70	3,10

Most testers spent the same amount of time on both tasks, as the examples in Table 2 also show. The slowest individual time was five minutes for the accommodation task, although the same tester (no. 15) completed the activity booking in less than two minutes. Ten respondents rated the ease of the second task at least 9, and three spent more than three minutes on the task. Of these, half showed joy, and half did not. With three slower but easy performances, there was joy in everyone during the task. For all tasks that took less than two minutes, the average rating for the task's easiness was 7.7.

Table 2: Compilation of User Walk

	Accommodation task	Activity task
Ease-of-use in average 1= very challenging - 10= very easy	6,8	6,3
Average time spent (min)	2,9	2,5
The quickest tester, no. 21	Ease-of-use: 10 Time spent: 0,9 min Mostly neutral emotions and expressions (60,5%). The eyebrows were furrowed 0.12 % of the time spent. The eyebrows were raised by 1,36 % of the time spent. Emotional reactions had slight surprisingness, less than 1 %	Ease-of-use: 10 Time spent: 0,8 min Mostly neutral emotions and facial expressions (61,1%). The eyebrows were furrowed for 1,21% of the time spent. The eyebrows were raised 0,78 % of the time spent. Emotional reactions had slight surprisingness, less than 1%.
The slowest tester, no. 22	Ease-of-use: 7 Time spent: 4,6 min Mostly neutral emotions and facial expressions (56,3 %). There was sadness in 10 % of the time spent, anger approx.. 5 % and fear 0,18 %. Tester's eyebrows were furrowed 55 % Raised eyebrows: 0 %. No surprisingness.	Ease-of-use: 4 Time spent: 4,5 min Mostly neutral emotions and facial expressions (57,5 %). There was sadness in 8 % of the spent time, anger 6 %, and fear 0,09 %. Tester's eyebrows were furrowed 55 %. Raised eyebrows: 0 %. No surprisingness.
The most	Ease-of-use: 9	Ease-of-use: 2

	Accommodation task	Activity task
significant difference in ease-of-use between the tasks, tester no. 16	Time spent: 4,4 min Mostly neutral emotions and facial expressions (54,8 %). There was anger 14,6 %, sadness 3,25 %, fear 2,1 % and joy 1,3 % of the time spent. Tester's eyebrows were furrowed 40 % of the time and raised 0,01%. No surprisingness.	Time spent: 3,3 min Mostly neutral emotions and facial expressions (58,9 %). There was anger in 27,3 %, sadness 2,3 %, fear and joy 0 % of the spent time. Tester's eyebrows were furrowed 49 % of the time and raised 0 %. No surprisingness.

Seven emotional states were measured: anger, sadness, disgust, joy, surprise, fear and contempt. Of these, the testers showed the most anger and the slightest contempt. Booking an activity aroused more anger among women than booking accommodation, while the result was the opposite among men. On the other hand, the average amount of time spent feeling anger was less than five seconds. The test measured 20 facial expressions, so furrowed brows or raised eyebrows do not reveal everything, and neither was the basic facial expression of the testers recognised. Thus, the results require an even deeper analysis.

In the experiment results, the testers who did not register cheerfulness had also not raised cheekbones. Smiling was also reported less than 1 % of the time. Three testers showed joy more than 10 % of the time and delivered a smile of 18-28 %. These the happiest testers spent 2.3-2.5 minutes completing the tasks.

In the group interviews, participants were told to describe how they executed the task, what was challenging and what they enjoyed. In the accommodation task clicking the dates and filling in the same information several times caused confusion and irritation.

"Even in a normal situation, nerves would have been lost. About booking that accommodation."

The visuality of the page received compliments that it is delivering well the destination's atmosphere. Some participants liked the video content on the front page, while others considered it disturbing and restless. Filtering the options could be improved to have more personalised or better suiting options for different needs easier. With the activity task, the booking was more straightforward, which seemed easier after the possibly faced challenges with the accommodation task.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

There was room for improvement in the website's usability and ease of use. Although the site was generally perceived as reasonably easy, few people gave full tens. However, this should strive from the customer and user experience perspective because ease-of-use is one of the key factors influencing the purchase decision.

Based on the preliminary results, the accommodation task was more straightforward (the average score of 7.7 was higher than the general average) and was also completed faster. Of course, one can wonder how much the assignment affected this because the respondents' commitment also seemed lower.

On the other hand, more effort was put into the activity task. This has a positive effect on recall and experience. The activity task also seemed to evoke more emotions. It was perceived as more complex, which also explains the effort.

Creating a tourism experience involves many steps and aspects that affect its success (Komppula & Boxberg, 2002). The same applies to digital user experience and customer experience (Rose et al. 2011; Jang & Han 2022). Customer emotions, especially in tourism services, play a crucial role in forming the experience. Plutchik's emotional wheel (1980) is often used to categorise emotions in research, and similar emotions can be found from the conducted user walk: anger, sadness, disgust, joy, surprise, fear and contempt. There is a connection between positive emotions and purchases, satisfaction, loyalty, cooperation and sharing experiences (Wu & Gao 2019; Nikolinakou & King 2018).

The functionality of the menu bar caused frustration. The site was not perceived as having very clear or easy-to-find information. Testers hoped for improvements to the online store in the interviews: the shopping cart and payment were perceived as unclear, and the selection and presentation of different services were difficult. It was experienced irritating to enter dates several times. From the perspective of usability and customer experience, it would be good if the system remembered the information entered by the customer during the

session. In addition, more personalisation and recommendations were desired; now, the customer had to search for a suitable product in the mass.

However, the main feeling was a joy. The pictures received praise, although they were not perceived as disturbing. As suggestions for development, the customers wanted, in addition to personalisation, for example, to be able to book a babysitter when booking a restaurant.

When these results are compared with Gentile et al.'s (2007) three dimensions of customer experience, we can create Table 3.

Table 3: Tester Responses Divided Into the CX Elements by Gentile et al. (2007)

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE ELEMENTS	TEST GROUP RESPONSES
EMOTIONAL ELEMENTS Feelings and emotions e.g. pleasure, satisfaction, or frustration	Trustworthyness and caring Fun and joy Satisfaction and benefit Easyness and benefit
SENSORIAL ELEMENTS Physical sensations e.g. sight, sound, touch, taste, smell	Visuality and looks Usability Promptness and fastness
BEHAVIORAL ELEMENTS Customer actions e.g. making a purchase or re-purchase	Paying options Service availability Easeness to use and ask questions

The user walk provided exciting information for the commissioning company and the project. In addition, it increased the understanding between user experience, travel experience, customer experience and emotions and helped to create Figure 4 based on the theory.

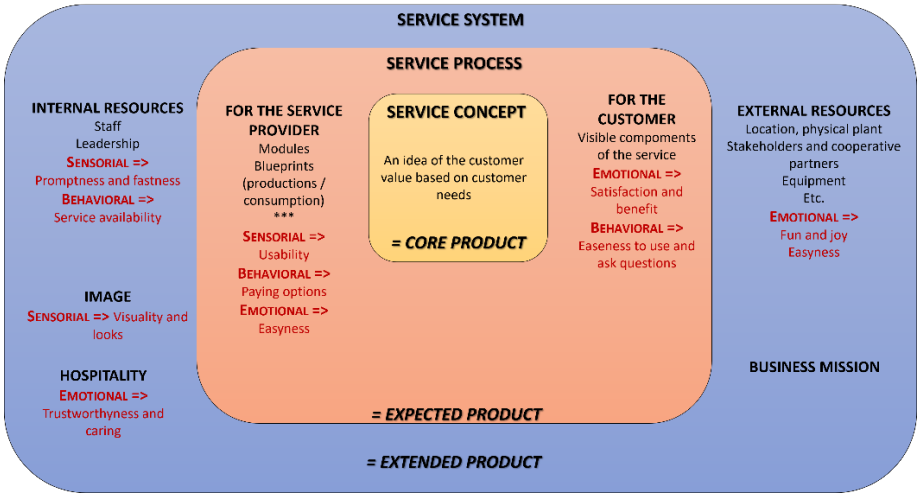

Figure 4: Travel Experience, User and Customer Experience and Emotions Combined Into Komppula & Boxberg's Model With Gentile et al.'s Dimensions

All analysed dimensions of Gentile et al. (2007) were present in different parts of the analysed tourism service site. Internal elements from the system point of view, like availability, promptness, visuality and caring, were easily interpreted from the study results and provided the company with valuable insights for future development. These also affect customers' emotional and behavioural dimensions with the demand for joy and fun, satisfaction and benefit, and ease of using the service.

By analysing the user walk results with the service product model by Komppula and Boxberg (2002) and with three dimensions by Gentile et al. (2007), it is interesting to notify that many essential elements of customer experience lie outside the core product, or even expected tourism experience. However, these elements create the willingness to buy and recommend the company, so they should not be considered as some extras but as the self-evident parts of a good tourism service. This can be regarded as the theoretical contribution of this research. It is also something that requires further study.

The managerial contribution of the research is the increased knowledge and understanding of the elements creating an excellent and persistent customer experience leading to loyalty and commitment among customers. Naturally, a web page that functions well creates emotions and is pleasing to customers' sensors (Tussyadiah 2014). The availability of good customer service online encourages customers to buy products repeatedly. Also, by creating emotions and a caring atmosphere, customers are more eager to buy more, recommend the company, and forgive potential service errors (Nawijn & Biran 2019).

Since the walk is only indicative, one can think about the importance of momentary frustration or anger in the overall experience. For this reason, the study should be repeated with a larger sample. An exciting research topic also arises from the importance of momentary experiences to the overall experience - can the feeling of anger experienced in the middle of the service process affect the final positive outcome? However, the importance of extreme emotions has been found in the literature to be significant and long-lasting (Tronvoll 2011).

Even in the process, there were clear development areas; for example, the assignment regarding accommodation was too one-sided. To achieve real emotional experiences - and thus results - it is good to think about a broader task that gives the respondent more freedom. Online customer service was also not tested in this study, even though it is an essential part of the customer service process.

Research concentrating on the meaning of the different levels of tourism experience products online is required to fortify the result of this study since, in online communication, the transformative and rememberable elements of a product might be different than in real life.

In conclusion, it can be stated that, based on this walk, tourism companies still have work to do in creating a digital experience. There are also challenges in usability, not to mention traditional experiential elements such as images and reliability. However, digital tools enable elements taken even further, for example, soundscapes.

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