

## Customer Engagement as a moderator between Customer Experience and Tourist Satisfaction in South West, Nigeria.

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### Abstract

**Background** Customer engagement has become a crucial factor for the desired success in the tourism industry and this necessitates a thorough understanding of the concept in order to deliver tourist satisfaction in the tourism sector. Thus the need to examine the various offerings and activities that tourist destinations should provide to engage the tourists during their visits. The aim of this research is explore the mediating role of customer engagement in the relationship between customer experience and tourist satisfaction

**Material and Method:** A structured questionnaire was administered to 600 tourists to the six purposively selected tourism destinations and only 519 responded to the questionnaire with only 477 found usable. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics like frequency, mean, standard deviation and also inferential statistics such as factor analysis, regression analysis and t-test statistics. All analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25.

**Results;** The findings revealed that customer engagement was statistically significant, having a scale of beta value of (beta = .767, P< .001). This means that customer engagement made a unique contribution in moderating the relationship between customer experiences.

**Conclusion** Destination managers should organize activities that can improve social interactions between the tourists and train the employees and tourist guides on better service delivery which could invariably strengthen customer satisfaction and loyalty.

**Keywords.** Tourists, Destination, Customer Engagement, Customer experience, Satisfaction

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### I. Introduction

The engagement construct has been studied in a variety of academic disciplines (e.g. advertising, education, narratives, psychology, and sociology), but it has yet to be well-established within the academic literature as a key marketing construct to study, specifically within the tourism context. It is well known that consumers build their experience based on relationships through intense participation by way of unique experiences embedded in the offerings and activities of the organizations. As a result, customer engagement has remained a “hot topic” in academia and one of the top MSI research priorities (2010, 2014, and 2016). Most empirical work that exists examines the mental engagement of consumers with a brand and thus focuses on experiences at specific touch points, such as the exposure to an advertising or the interaction with the firm’s frontline employees (e.g., Brodie et al. 2011; Malthouse and Calder 2011) but appears to overlook how customer engagement can be well-established within the academic literature as a key marketing construct in the tourism sector. In comparison to traditional concepts including ‘involvement’ and ‘participation’, ‘customer engagement’ has been postulated to reflect the nature of customer relationships with brands more comprehensively.

From the perspective of the tourism managers, it is important to understand what consumers believe constitutes an effective customer engagement. Tourism destinations represent an important avenue for tourists to see other places as objects of tourism, and the preparation of those people and places to be seen. The tourists have extremely greater expectations and as such they require an extraordinary level of customer experience and satisfaction. The absence of an established benchmark of how consumer engagement leads to positive brand and marketing objectives thus represents a gap in the literature that needs to be addressed

### Customer Experience

Since its introduction by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), customer experience (CX) has developed into an important consumer behavior and marketing phenomenon (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Knutson, Beck, Kim & Cha (2009) argue that experiences are perceived internally, and are individual for each user. An experience can occur when an individual actively transforms an occurrence into information (Caru and Cova, 2003). According to Frochot and Batat, (2013), experiences are sought after in the search of identity, at

the very heart of experiential consumption practices with sensations, emotional pleasures and unforgettable memories. Not only do people try to purchase products and services, they want to buy into the experiences provided by the consumption of products and services (Morgan et al., 2010). Consumption is therefore no longer viewed as the end of the economic cycle, but rather as a way of generating experiences and building life through experiences (Firat and Dholakia, 1998).

Customer experience is defined by Poulson and Kale (2004:270) as "an engaging act of co-creation between a supplier and a consumer in which the consumer perceives value in the encounter and in the subsequent memory of the encounter. Carbone and Haeckel (1994) considered experience as the take-away impression generated by people's experiences with goods, services and a company that is a perception, created when people consolidate and classify sensory knowledge. Schmitt (1999, 2000): identified Five forms of experience as sensory experience (sensing), affective experience (feeling), cognitive experience (thinking), physical experience (acting) and experience of social identity (relating).. More recently, De Keyser et al. (2015) developed five customer experience dimensions consisting of the cognitive, emotional, physical, sensory, and social elements that define the direct or indirect engagement of the customer with a [set of] market players. As one of the dimensions, Jiang et al. (2013) also established service quality, while Fatma (2014) established multichannel engagement as another dimension

### **Tourist Satisfaction**

Satisfaction is defined as the overall cognitive or affective reaction of consumers to product use (Oliver, 1997) and the judgment of consumers as to whether a product/service provides an affordable level of consumption-related satisfaction (Chen, Huang and Petrick, 2016). Similarly, other authors describe satisfaction as an efficient state resulting from a performance decision relative to expectations (Parsons, 2002; Payne & Holt, 2001), or the affective state of the customer resulting from an overall evaluation of the service experience (Verhoef et al., 2002) or " the feeling of pleasure or dissatisfaction of a person from comparing the perceived performance of a product (or outcome) in relation to his or her expectations" (Kotler, 2006).

Severt et al. (2007) therefore described tourist satisfaction as the degree of the satisfaction enjoyment of the tourist that resulted from the experience of the trip about a product or service function that meets the needs, expectations and wants of the tourist in connection with the trip. Satisfaction is specifically referred to in the sense of tourism as a result of pre-travel perceptions and post-travel experiences. When encounters go beyond expectations, the visitor is happy. However, if the visitor experiences some sort of disappointment, he or she will be unhappy (Chen & Chen, 2010; Reisinger & Turner, 2003).

Borishade, et al. (2018) empirically explored the correlation between customer experience and customer satisfaction and found that customer experience has an essential correlation with customer satisfaction. Similarly, Andajani (2015) analyzed how the actual execution of customer experience can help business organizations maintain long-term customer satisfaction and how the business gains an additional competitive advantage in retailing. Findings showed that customer experience takes place at every point of contact at which the customer interacts with the company or service. Based on the above, customer experience has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction, which is the first hypothesis,

H1. Customer experience plays a significant role in influencing tourist satisfaction.

### **Customer engagement**

The concept of engagement has been used in different contexts, resulting in many "engagement" terms as student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), customer engagement (Hollebeek, 2012), brand engagement (Hollebeek, 2011), employee engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001), consumer engagement (Brodie et al., 2013), a media engagement (Habibi et al., 2014) and civic engagement (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). Brodie et al., 2011 regarded customer engagement as "a multidimensional term subject to a context-and/or stakeholder-specific expression of the related cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral aspects" (p. 260). Hollebeek et al. (2014) on his part described customer engagement as being characterized by frequent experiences between a customer and an entity that strengthen a customer's mental, psychological or physical investment in the brand and the organization.

Gummerus et al. (2012) divided CE into "community engagement behaviors" and "transactional engagement behaviors" and measured CE through the "frequency of brand community visits, content liking, commenting, and news reading, as well as frequency of playing, and money spent on the internet gaming site" (p.863). In tourism, where interactions between service providers and tourists co-create encounters (Prebensen, Vittersø & Dahl, 2013), understanding the starting point of tourists in terms of what nature means to tourists is an important aspect for both the tourism industry and researchers.

The effects of tourist interaction on satisfaction and loyalty in Malaysia have been examined by Rasoolimanesh, Md Noor, Schuberth and Jaafar (2019). . It was found that the impact of tourist engagement on happiness was much higher than the impact of tourist engagement on loyalty. In their study, Lončarič, Perišić

and Dlačić (2017) explored the idea of co-creation of tourist experience and the relationships that exist between co-creation of tourist experience, customer satisfaction, and overall satisfaction with travel and customer loyalty. The study found that the participation of tourists influences customer satisfaction positively. In addition, it was further found that co-creation-enhanced customer satisfaction has a positive impact on customer loyalty.

Based on the above, customer engagement has a significantly moderating effect on the relationship between customer experience and tourist satisfaction, which is the second hypothesis, H2. Customer engagement plays a moderating role in the relationship between customer experience and tourist satisfaction.

## II. Materials and Method

**Research location** South West is a geopolitical zone in Nigeria. Their famous tourism attractions and sites include Ikogosi warm spring in Ekiti State, Olumirin Waterfall, Erinmo in Osun State, Old National Park, Oyo State, Idanre Hill in Ondo State, Olumo Rock in Ogun State, and Point of No Return in Badagry, Lagos State. This collection of six destinations was based on the popularity of the destinations: These destinations offer a broad range of activities, including cultural, recreation, leisure, and adventure thus fitting well with our objectives. Moreover, the inherently high level of tourism-based consumer-provider interaction offers the importance of studying relational constructs, including experience and engagement (Hwang and Seo, 2018; Taheri et al., 2014).

**Measurement** We deployed the following measures to gauge the constructs included in our model. First, we measured customer experience (CX) by adapting Weiler & Yu (2008), Richins (1997), Vong, & Ung, (2011), Yang & He (2011) scale, A total of 45 CX items was used, Second, customer engagement (CE) was measured by employing So, King, & Sparks (2014). 13 item scale Third, we gauged tourist satisfaction on Bajs (2015) and Lee et al. (2007) five-item instrument. Five-point Likert scale was used to gather the responses.

**Sampling and data collection** The target population of this study was tourists visited the six tourism destinations selected from each of the six states of south West geopolitical zone in Nigeria. They were chosen because they have a wide variety of sights and experiences..

**Sampling and Data collection** A sample of 100 tourists for data collection was randomly selected from each of the six tourist destination. The total sample size for this study, therefore, is 600 visitors. Using a self-administrated survey, data was collected from the six selected tourism destinations. We targeted domestic and international visitors. Convenience sampling technique was used to select our respondents (Parrey et al., 2019; Taheri et al., 2014). Before the main study, we pilot-tested the questionnaire with a convenience sample of 30 participants over a seven-day period. Results revealed no concerns about the questionnaire readability or item clarity. In the main research study, participants were requested to rate each statement on five point Likert scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The lead author managed two field investigators, who collected the data.

**Data Analysis.** The data was analyzed by using descriptive analysis, linear regression and hierarchical regression analysis.

**Study Duration** The data was gathered between 15<sup>th</sup> November, 2019 and 4<sup>th</sup> February, 2020.

## III. Results

**Sample Structure.** Out of 600 questionnaires submitted, 519 were returned, showing a response rate of 86.5 percent. The obtained sample for the main study was 519 respondents. The respondents who failed to provide correct responses on attention check questions were eliminated; resulting in the final sample of 477 responses representing 79.5%. Descriptive analysis indicated that 57% of the respondents were male. Examination of the informants' age shows that 35% were 18-28 years, 32% were 29-39 years, while 33% were above 39 years of age. About the travel purpose, 70% were adventure/leisure visitors, followed by 20% religious and 10% business visitors. The respondent profile is presented in Table 1.

### Testing research hypotheses

Table 1. Multiple regression result

#### Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

| Model        | Unstandardized Coefficients |            | Standardized Coefficients | t      | Sig. |
|--------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|--------|------|
|              | B                           | Std. Error | Beta                      |        |      |
| 1.(Constant) | 2.191                       | .125       |                           | 17.550 | .000 |
| Experience   | .560                        | .030       | .655                      | 18.905 | .000 |

a. Dependent Variable: experience

R .655

R<sup>2</sup> .429

Adj R<sup>2</sup> .428

F-statistic 357.382 Sig.000

H1 was tested using linear regression in SPSS version 25. Regression coefficient = 0.560, R = 0.655, R<sup>2</sup> = .429, Adj R<sup>2</sup> = 0.428, F-statistic = 357.382, p < 0.05. Results show that customer experience has a direct positive effect on tourist satisfaction. Therefore, H1 was supported.

### Hierarchical regression

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test H2 in Table 2 and 3.

**Table 2. Model Summary**

| Model | R    | R <sup>2</sup> | Adj. R <sup>2</sup> | Standard Error of Estimate | Change Statistics     |          |     |     |      |
|-------|------|----------------|---------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|----------|-----|-----|------|
|       |      |                |                     |                            | R <sup>2</sup> Change | F Change | df1 | df2 | Sig. |
| 1     | .655 | .429           | .428                | .397                       | .429                  | 357.382  | 1   | 475 | .000 |
| 2     | .830 | .688           | .687                | .293                       | .259                  | 393.413  | 1   | 474 | .000 |

**Table 3. ANOVA**

| Model |            | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F       | Sig. |
|-------|------------|----------------|-----|-------------|---------|------|
| 1.    | Regression | 56.211         | 1   | 56.211      | 357.382 | .000 |
|       | Residual   | 74.711         | 475 | .157        |         |      |
|       | Total      | 130.922        | 476 |             |         |      |
| 2.    | Regression | 90.096         | 2   | 45.048      | 523.010 | .000 |
|       | Residual   | 40.826         | 474 | .086        |         |      |
|       | Total      | 130.922        | 476 |             |         |      |

**Table 4 Coefficient**

| Model               | Unstandardized Coefficient |           | Standardized Coefficient | T      | Sig. | Correlation |            |         | Collinearity Statistics |           |
|---------------------|----------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|--------|------|-------------|------------|---------|-------------------------|-----------|
|                     | B                          | Std Error |                          |        |      | Beta        | Zero Order | Partial | Part                    | Tolerance |
| (Constant)          | 2.191                      | .125      |                          | 17.550 | .000 |             |            |         |                         |           |
| Customer Experience | .560                       | .030      | .655                     | 18.905 | .000 | .655        | .655       | .655    | 1.000                   | 1.000     |
| (Constant)          | 1.226                      | .104      |                          | 11.743 | .000 |             |            |         |                         |           |
| Customer Experience | .069                       | .033      | .081                     | 2.086  | .000 | .655        | .095       | .054    | .439                    | 2.275     |
| Customer Engagement | .685                       | .035      | .767                     | 19.835 | .000 | .828        | .673       | .509    | .439                    | 2.275     |

In the above Table 2, customer experience was keyed in at step 1, describing 42.9% of the variance in tourist satisfaction. After the keying in of buyer's customer engagement in the step 2 in Table 3, the overall variance described by the model in total was 68.7%, F(2,242) = 523,019, P<.005. Customer engagement described an additional 25.8% of the variance in tourist satisfaction after controlling for customer experience. R square change = .259, F change (1,474) = 393.413, p< .005. In the last model in, customer engagement was statistically significant, having a scale of beta value of (beta = .767, P< .005). This means that customer engagement made a unique contribution in moderating the relationship between customer experiences. Therefore, H2 was supported.

## IV. Discussion and Implications

**Theoretical implications** In the marketing literature, despite the call for improvement of customer satisfaction to increase customer loyalty (Chawla & Joshi, 2017; Dimyati, 2018; Gong & Yi, 2018), there is a need to incorporate other variables to further strengthen this relationship. Customer engagement play a significant role in services marketing especially within the tourism sector (To & Ho, 2014) There is little evidence in the extant literature of studies that have examined the mediating effects of customer engagement on the customer experience-tourist satisfaction relationship. More so, empirical literature is inconclusive about the moderating effects. Therefore, the study was carried out to narrow this existing knowledge gap in services marketing literature. The study shows that customer experience and customer engagement are critical factors that influence tourist satisfaction within the tourist sector

As expected, the study found that customer experience has a direct positive effect on tourist satisfaction. This finding complements the existing body of literature on this phenomenon (Borishade et al., 2018; Andajani., 2015; Ambad&Bujang, 2018; Sharma & Rather, 2015; Domb et al., 2015). Customer engagement was found to mediate the effect of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty. Results imply that customer engagement plays a crucial part in the relationship between customer experience and tourist satisfaction. This suggests that when predicting tourist satisfaction, both customer experience and customer engagement should be taken into consideration. This finding enriches the understanding of the relationship between customer experience and tourist satisfaction.

**Practical implications.** To increase tourist satisfaction, destination managers are encouraged to address issues that have to do with customer experience, customer engagement as well as destination image. Thus, destination managers are recommended to consider a set of factors such as cognitive, emotional, physical, sensory, social and customer engagement together as predictors of customer experience instead of considering tourist satisfaction, in isolation. Accordingly, destination managers are advised to increase tourist satisfaction by addressing the following altogether: First, destination managers are advised to provide accessibility systems that will facilitate access to the most important attraction features for the tourists and should provide adequate security for the tourists.. Second, it is recommended that destination managers should improve the level of social interaction with staff, other tourists and local people. This can be achieved by applying a multi-disciplinary and integrated approach to address the inadequacy in training and education on Third, stakeholders are also advised to improve on the quality of services in area of accommodation, restaurants and transportation.

## V. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to determine the role of customer engagement as a mediator in the relationship between customer experience and tourist satisfaction. The study found that customer engagement mediates the effect of customer experience on tourist satisfaction Destination managers should organize activities that can improve social interactions between the tourists and train the employees and tourist guides on better service delivery which could invariably strengthen customer satisfaction and loyalty. The study has limitations that provide reasonable grounds to conduct further studies. For example, the study was only conducted in one sector and in one country. This makes it difficult to generalize the findings. Therefore, it is recommended that further studies be conducted in other sectors and in other markets in order to improve the generalisability of the findings.

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