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For the love of experience: changing the experience economy discourse

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English Summary

In this dissertation the bias in the experience economy discourse is dealt with by constructing a sound and integrative theoretical foundation for the experience economy from the individual's perspective. The bias in the discourse mainly consists of the dominance of the experience provider's or organizational perspective in the language and logic that have been developed for the experience economy. By seeing experience from a broader perspective than the mere economic one, using insights from various disciplines, and by incorporating the individual's perspective in the discourse, a more complete and meaningful perspective for the experience economy emerges.

The attention for the experience economy has been very high during the last decade in mainly the areas of management and marketing. The experience economy is seen as the follow-up of the service economy and is therefore often described in terms of the increasing dematerialisation of the economy. While competitive advantage in the goods- and service economy was still largely base don the provision of physical attributes, the focus in the experience economy is often on intangible aspects like sensory impressions and emotional reactions of individuals.

A problem of the current experience economy literature is that there is no clear and generally accepted definition of what experience is. This creates much confusion and uncertainty about what one is talking about when using the term experience. A review of current experience economy literature made me realize that there are three different approaches to the phenomenon to be distinguished.

Basically, experience is a contact between an individual and something in his or her environment, in which the individual is also part of the environment. For each of these basic elements of an experience an approach can be identified in literature. The approach focused on experience as something in the environment I have named the

'environment-centred' approach. There is also an approach focused on what happens to the individual, the 'effect-centred' approach. Finally, there is an approach that looks at experience in terms of contact between the individual and the environment that I have called the 'encounter-centred' approach.

Each of the three distinct approaches of experience has a strong organizational bias in the discourse, leading to an incomplete perspective on the experience economy.

In the environment-centred approach, the role of the organization as experience producer and supplier is emphasized. Experiences are considered as economic offerings with objective features and it is the organization's task to define and deliver the "right" features. By doing this, other concepts of experience are ignored.

In the effect-centred approach, special attention is given to the role of organizations in managing and producing predetermined hedonic effects for individuals. The individual himself and his role in the emergence of effects is not taken into account in this approach of the experience economy. The existence of effects other than hedonic ones is disregarded.

In the encounter-centred approach, the contact between the individual and his environment is limited to the contact between an individual and an organization. The role of the organization is seen as determining which values the individual has to invest in the encounter, usually principally focused on money and time. Values that individuals invest in the experience that cannot be expressed in terms of money or time are left out of the picture.

To address the organizational bias in the discourse, other disciplines than those of marketing and management are consulted in chapter 3 to have a broader look at the phenomenon of experience. This shows that the features that are focused on in the environment-centred approach are not considered to be experience in other disciplines. It also becomes clear that experience can be viewed at different levels, which logically follow each other, resulting in a spectrum of experience concepts, ranging from secondary to vicarious, primary, emotional, meaningful and integrative.

The differences between Erlebnissen and Erfahrungen, two concepts that are distinguished in many European languages, are clarified in this chapter.

In Chapter 4, the bias in the effect-centred approach of the experience economy is addressed. First, the risks of the strong current focus on hedonic effects are discussed. Different kinds of pleasure are reviewed and 'eudaimonia' is introduced as an alternative to hedonism that is promoted by several philosophers. Also the bias regarding the role that organizations are claimed to have in terms of control they allegedly have over the effects created is scrutinized. Theories on learning and meaning show that rather than organizations, individuals determine what the effects of an experience will be.

The focus on specified values in the encounter-centred approach is discussed in chapter 5. Current methods of valuation are often based on the idea that the more the individual receives, the more value he or she perceives and the more the individual has to invest to obtain what he or she wants, the lower the perceived value will be. Different theories, however, speak against this idea. There also appear to exist values for which this relationship is different, even opposite: the more you invest, the more you obtain. Different types of value can be identified and organizations still disregard much of the value that cannot, or at least not easily, be expressed in terms of money or time. In this chapter three more facilitative and supportive roles for organizations in an experience economy are presented which take the full spectrum of value into consideration.

Up to this point the research is mainly based on theory, thus creating the risk that conclusions are drawn that do not do justice to the role of the individual in experiences. For this reason I have decided to existential-phenomenological interviews with individuals on the free choice learning experience they have had. From the results of these interviews three major themes have emerged: Engagement, Direction and Investment.

Engagement is about the relationship between the various constituents and parties that are involved in the experience. What can for example be said about the engagement of the organization with the participants and the experience? How can we involve the background of participants and their life outside the experience in the

experience? Direction refers to the role that the organization claims in the experience. For example, what is the desired amount of control? And what do participants in the experience want that control to consist of? Investment, by contrast, refers to the role of the participants in the experience. What role do they want or can they have in the experience? And how can their activity during a potential post-experience be supported?

The combination of theoretical knowledge and insights from the interviews shows how organizations can create more value in the experience economy. The overview of the whole experience economy discourse enables organizations to consciously make decisions on which type(s), effects and values of experience they want to focus on, and hence make wiser decisions. I also give some examples of how insights from this research have been implemented in one of the learning experiences that were discussed during the interviews: the EMIM-program.

Chapter 9 finally contains an epilogue on my own research process that resulted in this thesis. I describe my own experience as far as possible in terms of the concepts, effects, values and interview themes in this research.