

# Unlocking Tourism Value through a Tourist Experience Management Paradigm

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**Abstract**—Tourism has become a topical issue amongst academics and practitioners due to its potential to contribute significantly towards an economy's GDP. The problem underpinning this research is the fact that the major attraction, Victoria Falls, is being marketed in neighboring countries like South Africa, Botswana and Zambia with tour operators providing just day trips to the Victoria Falls. This has deprived Zimbabwe of income from tourism with tourists making day trips and actually not spending nights in Zimbabwe. This therefore calls for cutting edge marketing strategies that are superior to or inimitable by competing nations such as South Africa and Zambia. This study proposes a shift towards an experience management paradigm in the tourism sector. A qualitative research was adopted for this study, and findings of this study were generalized across different tourism contexts, therefore making the survey based research design more appropriate. The target population for this study is tourists visiting Zimbabwe over the period 2016 and ZTA visitor database acquired from the Department of Immigration will form the sampling frame for the purposes of this study.

**Keywords**—Competitiveness, tourist arrivals, tourist experience, Zimbabwe.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ACADEMICS and practitioners have developed a keen interest in tourism due to its potential to contribute significantly towards an economy's GDP. Tourism is fast becoming a major source of economic growth in developing countries [3]. According to UNWTO [47:11] "...in spite of its growing relevance and proven contribution to GDP, jobs and exports, tourism still lacks due political and economic recognition." It was therefore not surprising that the Zimbabwean government identified the tourism sector as a potential major contributor to the turnaround of the economy. The government of Zimbabwe expected tourism to contribute 15% to GDP by 2015 of which target was never achieved [15]. In the same vein, The Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) aims to facilitate increase in tourist arrivals by 95.09%, from 1.794 million in 2012 to 3.5 million by 2018 [35]. This is a very ambitious objective when put in the context of global projections over the same period. UNWTO [34] projects global tourist arrivals to grow by 54.59% from 1.035 billion in 2012 to 1.6 billion by 2020.

It is generally accepted in business that a firm that needs to earn above average profits must come up with cutting edge

strategies that are superior to and inimitable by competitors [20]. On the same logic, for Zimbabwe to realize tourist arrivals that are nearly double the global average, tourism players must come up with cutting edge growth strategies that are underpinned by sound understanding of tourist characteristics, experiences, and behavior.

There is an emerging consensus within the marketing field that delivering superior customer experiences will become a major source of competitive advantage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century [14]. Despite the general increase in interest in customer experiences, authors [16] posit that there is need for a more comprehensive examination of research on tourism experience. This has left managers within the industry with insufficient knowledge on how to develop services that meet the exact experience needs of tourists. As the customer is at the center of any organization's activities, so should be the tourist to activities of suppliers of tourism services. The starting point in the effective management of tourist experiences must be the tourist. The above management dilemma has therefore triggered an interest in research specifically on managing tourist experiences in Zimbabwean tourism services with particular interest on how international tourists interact with the Victoria Falls and the resultant management of their experiences.

## II. TOURISTS EXPERIENCES

The concept of consumer experience remains less established despite great research interest on the concept towards the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century [4]. The researchers undertook a review of marketing research on the experience concept, and concluded that research on the concept was still emerging. They argued that more research was needed to illuminate understanding on the process by which experiences impacted on consumer behavior, the universality of consumer experiences, among other research directions. In a separate study, [23] argued that there were few studies in which academic researchers investigated the usefulness and importance of the customer experience management concept to organizations.

In their study, Nwokah and Gladson-Nwokah [23] appeared to use the term customer experience interchangeably with the term consumer experience. However, findings from Schmitt and Zarantonello [4] reveal a difference in emphasis between consumer experience researchers and customer experience researchers. The findings reveal that consumer experience research focuses on the consumer, while customer experience research focuses on the company and how it can create experiences for its customers. Another study that did not

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follow the pattern identified in [4] was by Rose et al. [28] who investigated antecedents and outcomes of e-tailing online customer experience. Rose et al. [28] focused on the consumer not the companies as suggested by Schmitt and Zarantonello [4]. These deviations buttress the argument that research on the experience concept is still emerging and fragmented.

It can be noted that much of the research on the experience concept focused on the consumer goods markets. However, research interest in the services sector was also gaining momentum. For instance, a study by Nwokah and Gladson-Nwokah [23] focused on the aviation sector. Similarly, a study by Chauhan and Manhas [31] focused on the nature and extent of customer experience in the civil aviation sector. Additionally, a seminal paper by Pine and Gilmore [5] represented a major attempt to put the experience concept at the epicenter of business management. The researchers argued that the services economy was withering away with the experience economy taking over. In this economy, customers will spend money on experiences as opposed to goods and services. Organizations needed to develop and deliver best experiences to their customers if they were to gain and sustain competitive advantage. Pine and Gilmore proposed four dimensions of experience: Educational, aesthetics, escapist, and entertainment [3]. The work by Pine and Gilmore formed an avenue for experience research within the tourism field, because the latter is regarded as a pioneer example of Pine and Gilmore's experience economy [1].

Despite the obvious link between the experience economy concept and the tourism sector, experience research within the tourism field remains very low. Ritchie et al. [16] undertook a review of extent of experience research in tourism. The scholars argued that tourism managers needed to adopt a management paradigm that was rooted in experience design and delivery. This they believed could only happen when there is a full understanding of the nature of tourism experience and its forms. The findings of the study revealed that there was no heightened research emphasis on tourism experience between 2000 and 2009. The findings also revealed that experience related studies were underrepresented in the tourism literature. Ritchie et al. [16] recommend a better understanding of the various types of tourism experiences, and how individuals distinguish them.

There also appears to be a dearth of tourism studies in which researchers incorporated Pine and Gilmore's [5] realms of experience model. Quadri-Felitti and Fiore [10] observed that there were very few studies that measured or tested the realms of experience model within the tourism context. This observation followed on their earlier observation to that effect [14]. Some studies that could easily have incorporated the realms of experience model completely ignored the model. For instance, Saayman et al. [21] undertook a study to determine factors that constituted a good festival experience in South Africa.

In this study, the researchers could have used the realms of experience model but there was no mention of the model in their study. This was also the case in the study by Backlund and Stewart [12], although the researchers tacitly incorporated

some aspects of the realms of experience model, namely aesthetics and escapist. The absence of research interest to test the realms of experience model in tourism studies is surprising considering the seminal nature of Pine and Gilmore's work [5]. More surprising is the fact that some tourism researchers appear to be ignorant of the realms of experience model.

Findings of studies undertaken within the tourism field to measure and test the realms of experience model have not been conclusive on which realms affect tourist outcomes. Findings of a study by Quadri-Felitti and Fiore [10] indicated that aesthetic experience was dominant in predicting memories and destination loyalty in the wine tourism context. Educational experience was found to play a significant but lesser role in creating memories and satisfaction but had no influence on destination loyalty. Findings of a study by Manthiou et al. [22] on festival experiences revealed that all the four realms of experience had a significant impact on visitor vivid memories. However, only aesthetics and entertainment dimensions had an impact on loyalty.

Hosany and Witham [25] studied cruiser experiences with findings showing that aesthetics experience was the main determinant of experience outcomes of cruisers. Findings of a study by Ho and Tsai [24] put forth that leisure farm tourists were more satisfied with aesthetic experiences, escapist experiences, entertainment experiences and educational experiences respectively. From these studies, it is apparent that while the role of aesthetic experiences on tourist outcomes is clear across different tourist settings and contexts, the role of other experience realms is not very clear. Further studies focusing on other settings and contexts, and replicating studies would help to illuminate understanding on the realms of experience model.

From review of literature it is becoming clear that experience research is generally emerging with relatively few studies in the tourism field. While the work of Pine and Gilmore [5] on experience economy was ground breaking, it was not followed up with expected vigour of the empirical research front. There is therefore need for more experience studies that incorporate the realms of experience model.

### III. TOURIST EXPECTATIONS IN DESTINATION

Zeithaml et al. [32] identified five antecedents to expectations: Personal needs; perceived service alternatives; self-perceived service role; situational factors beyond the service provider's control; and past experiences with the service. Before one decides on a destination to visit there are various underlying factors which need to be taken to consideration. These factors therefore become one's expectation in destination of choice.

Findings from a research on tourists' visitation in marine tourism [30] revealed that destination awareness, motivation, and word of mouth (WOM) are factors that influence tourists' visit. The gap between expectations and perceptions of service received can help managers to evaluate various aspects of the service they provide [13]. Giritlioglu et al. [13] further emphasize that management's attention should focus on those aspects of the service from which highest expectations are

derived and the largest gap between expectations and perceptions is evident.

Larsen [26] indicated the interactive nature of tourist experiences, and suggested that interactions between tourists and travel systems include three stages:

1. before the trip;
2. processes during the trip; and
3. after the trip.

During pre-trip considerations as they plan, tourists foresee possible events through expectations, while during the processes tourists will have different perceptions of events, and after the trip they will have memories. These three factors (expectations, perceptions, and memories) connect the entire processes of the trip, which then creates the tourist experience, and may even influence other tourists' expectations for the same or different types of trips [7]. In addition, Sheng and Chen [7] went on to develop a questionnaire on museum tourist expectations. Their study indicates that tourism experience expectations include five factors: Experience expectations of easiness and fun, cultural entertainment [27], personal identification, historical reminiscences, and escapism. Arguably, destination image and awareness is also closely linked to tourists' expectations and plays a role in the determination of first time tourists' decisions to visit [33].

#### *Expected Attractiveness*

Gunn [6] asserts that attractions embody the energizing power of the tourism systems. Most importantly, it is the attractiveness of a destination that influences individuals to pursue their travel and spend time there. Following this, Mlozi [27] adds that in tourism, the attractiveness of a destination is usually based on tourists' judgments or views about the destinations expected ability to meet their needs. For visitors, a location's attractiveness is determined by the services and facilities, scenery, memory and participation that can satisfy customers.

Apparently, cultural attractiveness is core to tourists visit intentions and the core attributes of cultural dimensions include different heritage resources such as paintings, history, folklore, music, and special events. Generally, the attractiveness of a destination decreases in the absence of these attributes [29]. The most ideal expected attractions of a destination are those that are rare, inimitable, and only available at a particular destination or at very few destinations [27].

#### IV. TOURIST EXPERIENCES OF TOURISM SERVICES

Pine and Gilmore [5] coined the term experience economy and make the overt claim that experience represents a move beyond products and service. They define experiences as "events that engage the individual in a personal way". Sheng and Cheng, [7] further define experiences in the context of tourism and argue that experiences can be referred to as those encounters one (tourist) has with tourism services, in other words the 'moment of truth' following their expectations of those services.

Tourists' experiences can be divided into active and passive experiences based on tourists' degree of involvement [7]. Active experiences include educational or escapist experiences, as people actively participate and are involved in travelling situations, and can even create various experiences in the process. Passive experiences include aesthetic and entertainment experiences. Additionally, Chi [8] suggests that tourists' previous experiences are likely to have significant impact on their perception of destination image and future behavior. Furthermore, [19], [15], [2] add that previous experiences with a destination can have a significant impact on individuals' decision making and destination selection process. Although their study focused on destination loyalty formation, Gursoy et al. [9] echoed that previous experiences with a destination have a positive effect on satisfaction and can also have a significant impact on individuals' involvement with a product category and activities. This implies that the more satisfied a tourist is, the more they are likely to make a return visit to that destination, owing to their previous experiences.

#### V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, qualitative data collection and analysis techniques were used as the researchers sought to develop a deep understanding of tourist experiences. However, views were extracted from international tourists and ZTA authorities. ZTA authorities were considered in this study because they regulate the Zimbabwe tourism industry and make an overall assessment of how the industry performs at the end of each year.

##### *A. Research Method*

The phenomenon of tourist experience has not been explored in any detail in the context of Zimbabwe. It therefore means that an in-depth and detailed understanding of the phenomenon is required. This was better achieved by directly speaking to people engaged with the phenomenon through a qualitative research. This thus makes the qualitative research method most appropriate for the research problem at hand.

##### *B. Research Design*

In this study, transcendental phenomenological approach was adopted since the approach made it possible to generate objective knowledge in qualitative studies.

##### *C. Sampling*

A target population refers to population elements that possess information required to answer the research questions. In the current study, international tourists and ZTA authorities form the target population. The sampling elements for this study were international tourists at Victoria Falls between 24 and 30 September 2016. September was the chosen period for data collection because it is summer holiday for most supply countries and Zimbabwe as well. According to Senderayi [11] this is a period of high tourism activities in the resort due to the favorable weather conditions. Because data collection involved interviews with respondents, only international

tourists resident in Zimbabwe during data collection were targeted. The researchers approached tourists and indicated their intention to collect data about their experiences in the resort town. A list of tourists who expressed interest in participating in the study was generated, which then acted as the sampling frame. The list had 50 elements, with names and contact details of the tourists.

Non-probability sampling technique, particularly judgmental sampling techniques was used to select sample elements. The weaknesses of non-probability sampling techniques are that the sample will not be truly representative of the population, and inferences cannot be made from the findings. This is one major limitation of this study, which can be addressed through further studies that use other methodologies, particularly quantitative techniques.

The approach followed in this study was to interview at least 23 respondents (20 international tourists and 3 ZTA management) and continue interviewing other respondents until the point of data saturation is reached. According to Creswell (18: 64) 20-30 interviews are adequate for a qualitative study.

#### *D. Data Collection Procedures*

An interview guide with 10 questions was used and during the data collection process, researchers asked follow up questions in order to elicit as much information as possible from respondents. The researchers recorded all the interviews with an audio instrument. This approach enabled researchers to spend more time listening and asking follow up questions rather than get distracted by writing notes. This approach however had the potential to negatively affect the willingness of respondents to participate in the study. Assurances were given to respondents that the information obtained from them will solely be used for the current research and the audios would never be made available to anyone else apart from the supervision team.

#### *E. Data Organization and Analysis*

Audio recorded interviews were transcribed to obtain a typed transcript of each interview. Data were grouped into codes and themes as suggested by Creswell [17]. Thematic analysis was to analyze the coded data.

### VI. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study was premised on the assumption that expected tourist destination attractiveness is derived from the operationalization of Pine and Gilmore's 4 realms of experience (education, entertainment, escapism and esthetics). The findings are arranged as follows:

#### *A. International Tourist Responses*

##### *Education*

Education increases the customers' skills and enhances their knowledge through active participation in the experience. In tourism, satisfaction is a combination of perceived quality and value, consumer expectations and actual experiences. Results show that visitors always have something to learn when they

visit Victoria Falls e.g. formation of the falls, language, culture etc.

One respondent from Europe who was a first timer was excited to share his experience with the friendly locals where he got a chance to learn about the Zimbabwean culture, and the Boma experience where he sampled traditional dishes and game meat. However, another respondent from the UK indicated that it was his second time visiting the Victoria Falls, but he always learns something new; "I just love how Zimbabwe has such a diverse culture [...] so far I can greet in the Ndebele language".

##### *Entertainment*

This entails watching the activities and or performances of others. The customer is not actively involved in the creation of the entertainment, but the mind and body maybe actively engaged during appreciation of the event. Entertainment does not seem to meet tourist expectations as majority of respondents expressed that it was lacking in so many ways.

One respondent, a young artist from Belgium revealed that each time they visit the Victoria Falls, they did not learn anything new and different. "I always experience the same drum beats and dances during dinner and the same fire stunts after a boat cruise [...]"

Another respondent from South Africa expressed dismay at the quality of entertainment in Zimbabwe. Sharing his experiences with other nations he has visited he said "Zimbabwe has no night life....I have discovered that they only operate 10 hours a day"

##### *Escapism*

Because tourists want to escape from their daily lives for a little while, they are likely to remember a destination that affords them such privilege. The greater the number of activities offered within the destination, the greater the potential for customers to fully realize the escapist dimension. Victoria Falls offers a number of excursions (bungee jumping, white water rafting, boat cruise, flight of the angels etc.) and nearby is the Hwange National Park.

One young respondent from Namibia said it was her first time to visit the Victoria Falls and the thought of bungee jumping gave her butterflies: "The moment I was buckled up my mind was on jumping alone and nothing else [...] so yes I escaped from my everyday life through activities"

##### *Esthetics*

Pine and Gilmore [5] depict esthetics as the totality of atmospherics and frame of physical environment. Generally, respondents loved the esthetics at Victoria Falls i.e. the walk in the rainforest, the water drizzles and seeing monkeys and warthogs in the rainforest.

A respondent from Europe was excited to share how he is always amused by the mystery behind the formation and beauty of the Victoria Falls. She says it was not her first visit, but 3<sup>rd</sup> and would not go back home without taking a walk in the rainforest. "It's amazing how the Falls look different on every visit [...] I have fallen in love with Zimbabwe despite the negative publicity"

### ZTA Management Responses

Generally, the 3 ZTA managers concurred with the respondents' views regarding the 4Es experience. However, ZTA managers expressed concern over the tired tourism product. One manager said "we need to revamp tourism promotion by working closely with stakeholders in order to improve our destination image.

Another manager said "It's true Victoria Falls operates from 8am to 6pm meaning it only has daytime activities compared to Niagara falls which operates 24 hrs tourists have the privilege to view the falls at night. This also has a bearing on duration of stay and tourist experiences"

The findings therefore imply that Victoria Falls as a product requires development and increased destination access since it is the major highlight for tourism in Zimbabwe. Managing tourist experiences (4Es of experience) coupled with enabling policies may help policy makers improve destination marketing.

## II. CONCLUSIONS

The research concludes that policy makers i.e. government, ZTA and Zimbabwe Council for Tourism (ZCT) work closely with industry players such as destination marketing organizations, tour operators, hotels etc. in order to manage tourist experiences. As Pine and Gilmore [5] put it, economies have transitioned into the experience economy dubbed the 'exonomy'. Although Zimbabwe is still a developing nation, it may have to quickly embrace this new concept proposed by Pine and Gilmore [5], if the country's tourism destinations are to remain competitive by offering memorable tourist experiences, in particular the Victoria Falls which is the hub of tourists in Zimbabwe. The research however had its limitations since a qualitative study was adopted. However, future researches can focus on other tourism destinations in Zimbabwe and apply a quantitative studies as is the case with most tourism studies.

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