

## EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSIONS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF NATURE-BASED TOURISM

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper aims at investigating the customers' experience in nature-based attractions and its influence on post consumption behavior.

**Design** – The study uses two theoretical frameworks (experience economy and behavioural intentions) to investigate the determining dimensions of the wildlife experience to customer satisfaction, and the relationships between the wildlife experience and the behavioural intentions.

**Approach** – The research develops an explanatory framework of consumer experience that measures the four dimensions and their relative influence on satisfaction, perceived service quality and behavioral intentions.

**Methodology** – The proposed research framework was empirically tested by implying a quantitative research and the technique of convenience sampling to customers of Game Reserves in Republic of South Africa.

**Findings** – The results indicate that the experience framework constitutes a valid tool for the study of wildlife experiences. In the context of nature-based tourism the experiential dimensions which influence the perceived service quality and customers' satisfaction are escapism and esthetics. There is also a strong correlation between wildlife experience and post consumption behavioural intentions, especially for word-of-mouth and repurchase intention.

**Originality** – The research extends existing theory by incorporating new elements and empirically investigating them within a new context. It is the first empirical study that investigates the experiential dimensions within the context of nature-based tourism and customers' behavioural intentions. It develops an explanatory framework of customer experience that measures the four dimensions, their relationship with experience outcomes (satisfaction and perceived service quality) and their relative influence on behavioural intentions.

**Keywords** Customer experience, experiential dimensions, nature-based attractions, perceived service quality, behavioral intentions.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is a service-intensive industry that is dependent on the quality of customers' experiences and their consequent assessments of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Ladhari 2009, Mossberg 2007, Saha and Theingi 2009). It is therefore significant for tourism businesses to understand the importance of customer perceptions of their experiences and to work hard to measure and continually improve ways to satisfy tourists. It is believed that a memorable tourism experience will lead to perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and post-consumption behavioral intentions (Filieri et al. 2017).

Current research suggests a series of theoretical foundations, perspectives and approaches to analyze and understand consumer's experience in general, and tourism experience in particular. One of the theoretical frameworks is the experience economy defining four realms of experiences, namely: entertainment, educational, esthetic, and escapist (Pine and Gilmore 1998). The present article focuses on nature-based tourism that is seen as essentially those tourist activities that involve the direct use of a destination's natural resources as either a setting or an attraction (Lawton and Weaver 2001, Soleimanpour 2012). These nature-based attractions (NBAs) offer an experience including all services and activities such as accommodation, dining, wildlife activities, entertainment services (events and shows) and educational opportunities (Merkesdal 2013, Sotiriadis et al. 2014). One of the main challenges that management of these organizations need to overcome is better understanding and knowledge of consumer behavior.

This paper reports on a study regarding the wildlife experience in the NBAs. The main aim of this research was to develop an explanatory framework of customer experience that measures the four dimensions and their relative influence on behavioral intentions within the context of NBAs. Our research addresses a knowledge gap by including the framework of experiential dimensions (Pine and Gilmore 1998 and 1999) and the dimensions of post-consumption behavior of customers in a single framework. The study's findings provide a deeper understanding of dimensions of wildlife experiences and the way these experiences are influencing customers' post-consumption behavior. It is believed that such an analysis contributes to improve customer experience and its outcomes (perceived service quality and customers' satisfaction), and to render management and marketing actions more effective.

## **1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Our understanding of satisfaction and post consumption behavioral intentions is commonly examined as the outcome of tourism experiences (Tung and Richie 2011). Customers' experience has been investigated from various perspectives and streams of research, e.g. marketing (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), environmental psychology (Bitner 1992, Breiby 2015). Our research focused on the experiential dimensions from the service management and marketing perspective. The issues related to consumption experience as well as the previous studies are presented in the following subsections.

### **1.1. Consumption experience, perceived service quality and customer satisfaction**

Literature suggests many different meanings and interpretations of the concept 'consumer experience'. Consumption (or customer) experience is the sum of all experiences a customer has with a provider of goods and/or services, over the duration of his or her relationship with that provider (Kwek and Ross 2016). According to Pine and Gilmore (1999, 11), experiences are "events that engage the individual in a personal way." For the purposes of this study, an experience is a unique blend of many individual elements that come together and may involve the consumer emotionally, physically, and intellectually, as suggested by Mossberg (2007).

In an attempt to better analyze and contextualize the concept, researchers proposed different approaches regarding what creates experiences (see, for example, Mossberg 2007, Prebensen et al. 2014). Pine and Gilmore (1999) are less concerned with specific elements of what creates an experience. They instead suggest four main dimensions of experiences along two axes: the customer's level of participation and the customer's connection with the surroundings. These experiential dimensions are presented below, in subsection 2.1. It is believed that a memorable tourism experience will lead to overall perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and post-consumption behavioral intentions (Cooper and Hall 2008). Service quality has been defined as a cognitive evaluation of a performance by a service provider (Ladhari 2009, Parasuraman et al. 1988). Literature suggests that perceived service quality and customer satisfaction are distinctive constructs. Perceived service quality is evaluated by the actual performance of the service in terms of particular service attributes in the specific context, whereas customer satisfaction is assessed by the customers' overall experience of the service of which service quality is only one aspect (Oliver 1997, Saha and Theingi 2009). Therefore, customer satisfaction depends on a variety of factors, including perceived service quality, customers' mood, emotions, social interactions, and other experience-specific subjective factors. There is general agreement that when tourists are satisfied, a range of actions and behaviors follow. Tourists who are satisfied with a tourism business or destination: (i) are more likely to recommend the destination to others, and (ii) are likely to become loyal and visit repeatedly (Cooper and Hall 2008).

## **1.2. Customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions**

Scholars (see, for example, Ladhari 2009) have been interested in the relationship between perceived service quality and behavioral intentions. Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Zeithaml et al. (1996) have both reported that a positive relationship exists between perceived service quality and post-consumption behavioral intentions. In this regard, three customer behaviors have been associated with organization's performance, namely: WOM, repurchase intention / loyalty, and feedback to the service provider (Ladhari 2009). WOM refers to a flow of information about products, services, or companies from one consumer to another (Litvin et al. 2008, 459). Positive WOM has been clearly associated with superior service quality. There is general agreement about the WOM's valence (positive or negative): satisfied customers generate positive WOM, whereas dissatisfied customers generate negative WOM (Bitner 1990, Oliver 1997). It is also suggested that positive recommendation is always driven by satisfaction (Saha and Theingi 2009).

Chen suggests that customer loyalty can be defined as "a consumer's loyal attitude and behavior toward a specific service firm, despite competitors providing alternative services in the market." (2015, 108). Regarding this dimension (/repurchase intention), researchers have found a positive association between overall customer satisfaction and repurchase intention (e.g. Alexandris et al. 2002, Bujisic et al. 2015). As for the third behavior noted above – customer feedback – was defined as "the transmission of negative information (complaints) or positive information (compliments) to providers about the services used" (Saha and Theingi 2009, 354). Very few studies have examined the relationship between customer satisfaction and feedback. Soderlund

(1998) suggests that dissatisfied customers are significantly more likely to provide negative feedback than are satisfied customers to provide positive feedback.

### **1.3. Previous studies: Applications of experience economy framework**

A body of research on applications of the experience economy concepts has appeared in the marketing literature (Walls 2013). However, little empirical evidence can identify and measure the dimensions and aspects of the customer's experience despite the relevance of experience economy to the tourism industry (Gilmore and Pine 2002, Mehmetoglou and Engen 2011). This is especially so in various tourism contexts (Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2013). The review of literature indicates that the experience framework suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1999) has to a small extent been subject to empirical examination. The main studies that empirically investigated this framework are the following in chronological order. The study performed by Oh et al. (2007) aimed to provide scales for measuring the concepts of experience economy and to empirically test the predictive validity of these concepts applied to the experience of bed & breakfast accommodation. Within this context, the esthetic dimension appeared to be a dominant determinant of the experiential outcomes (Oh et al. 2007). The escapist and entertainment dimensions were not statistically significant contributors to customer satisfaction, arousal, memory and overall quality. The study by Hosany and Witham (2010) found that the correlation between the experience dimensions and the outcomes was strong, that the four experience dimensions were statistically related to memory, arousal, and perceived overall quality. However, the four dimensions differ in terms of their relative importance in explaining the outcome variables. Similar to the Oh et al. (2007) results, esthetics was the main determinant of experiential outcomes. Further, results indicate that overall, the four dimensions of cruisers' experiences have a direct effect on intention to recommend (Hosany and Witham 2010).

Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) investigated the four experiential dimensions within two different tourism contexts: an event (festival) and a built visitor attraction (museum) in Norway. The findings show that different experiential dimensions influence the customers' overall satisfaction in different contexts. More specifically, (i) for the Festival, escapism and esthetics had positive effects, while education and entertainment did not have any effect on overall satisfaction at this event. (ii) for the Museum: education and esthetics had positive effects; however, escapism and entertainment did not have any effect on visitors' satisfaction (Mehmetoglu and Engen 2011). The study by Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2013) evaluated the wine tourists' experience in the Lake Erie wine region (USA). Study's findings indicate the dominance of the esthetic dimension in predicting positive memories and destination loyalty in the wine tourism context. Education played a significant but lesser role in creating memories and satisfaction. The pre-eminence of experiential dimension of esthetics was consistent with findings of previous studies (Mariani 2016, Oh et al. 2007, Hosany and Witham 2010). Lastly, the study by Bujisic et al. (2015), based on the experience economy framework, developed a model that incorporated guest experiences, satisfaction, return intention, WOM, and personality traits. The context examined was visitor attractions in general in the USA. The study's results support the assertion that different experience dimensions have different effect on satisfaction with the specific experience. Educational and entertainment experiences displayed a mild

positive effect on satisfaction; escapist experiences had no significant effect. Similar to the results of studies by Oh et al. (2007) and Hosany and Witham (2010), esthetics was the main determinant of experiential outcomes. The observed relationship between satisfaction, WOM and return intention was confirmed to be very strong (Ali et al. 2016).

What are the main conclusions that could be drawn from the above studies? In our view there are three main conclusions, namely (i) the experience framework has been proved reliable and valid for measuring customers' experience within various tourism contexts; (ii) the relative influence of four dimensions in estimating the experiential outcomes is varying from one context to the other; the four dimensions were found to operate differently in each tourism setting; and (iii) the previous studies findings contradict Pine and Gilmore's assertion that simultaneous incorporation of the four dimensions is necessary (Mariani 2016). The above literature review indicates that there is a gap between the experience framework and empirical evidence. This gap calls for a more empirical investigation to gain a better understanding of this valuable theoretical framework (Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2013). In addition, Oh et al. (2007), Hosany and Witham (2010) call for further validation of the measurement model in other tourism contexts. There are no, at our knowledge, empirical studies that investigated the influence of the wildlife experience on post-consumption behavior. The present study addresses this gap.

## **2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES**

The research framework is based upon the theoretical backgrounds of experience economy and the dimensions of post-consumption behavior. Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggest four main dimensions of experiences along two axes: the customer's level of participation and the customer's connection with the surroundings. The customer's participation varies between active and passive participation. The second axis of experience relates to the extent to which the customer is connected with the surroundings. At one end of the continuum of connection lies absorption and at the other end lies immersion (Pine and Gilmore 1998, Triantafillidou and Siomkos 2013). It could be argued that the entertainment experience is about feeling, the educational experience learning, the esthetic experience presence, and the escapist experience doing (Ali et al. 2016). These dimensions offer a theoretical framework for how experiences can be categorized (Pine and Gilmore 1999). This framework has been proved reliable and valid for measuring customers' experience within various tourism contexts. This study used the four experiential dimensions as the basis for analysis and measurement of wildlife experience.

The most commonly used theoretical framework to evaluate and measure post behavior of customer is that proposed by Zeithaml et al. (1996) suggesting that favorable behavioral intentions included three dimensions, namely recommendations, pay price premium, and express cognitive loyalty to the organization (purchase intentions). Unfavorable behavior included complaining. This model was extended by Saha and Theingi (2009) incorporating five constructs: WOM (recommendations), intention to repurchase (loyalty), feedback, service quality (perceived quality), and customer

satisfaction. Two constructs - perceived quality and customer satisfaction - may be considered as the outcomes of experience. The other three are the dimensions of behavioral intentions: WOM, customer loyalty, and customer feedback.

The experiential outcome of customer satisfaction has been examined in tourism literature's previous studies (e.g. Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2013). Oh et al. (2007) found a strong relationship between esthetic dimension, and perceived service quality and satisfaction. The very strong effect of esthetics on guest satisfaction is confirmed by Bujisic et al. (2015). Hosany and Witham (2010) indicated that two experiential dimensions, esthetics and entertainment, significantly contribute to satisfaction. The same finding was suggested by Mehmetoglou and Engen (2011) and Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2013).

The following five hypotheses – relating to relationships between experience's dimensions, perceived service quality and customer satisfaction, and post-consumption behavior of customers – were postulated. *H1*: The four experiential dimensions influence the wildlife experience as perceived by customers, they all have a significant effect on perceived quality and customer satisfaction, as suggested by the experiential framework and previous studies (Bujisic et al. 2015, Mehmetoglu and Engen 2011, Oh et al. 2007, Pine and Gilmore 1999, Su et al. 2016). *H2*: Tourism consumption experience affects the perceived service quality and has as a result the satisfaction of customers. This, in turn, affects the overall behavioral intentions. Recent research suggests that tourists' satisfaction may play a mediating role between the four experiential dimensions and the behavioral intentions (Hosany and Witham 2010, Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2013).

*H3*: Experiential dimensions positively influence the behavioral intention 'WOM'. Literature suggests that customers who are satisfied provide WOM, recommendations and online reviews. Both satisfied and dissatisfied customers could engage in WOM. (Bitner 1990, Bujisic et al. 2015, Ladhari 2009, Litvin et al. 2008, Saha and Theingi, 2009). *H4*: Experiential dimensions positively influence the behavioral intention 'customer loyalty'. Satisfied customers are generally willing to revisit the business / repurchase the service experience, unless better opportunities (in terms of value for money) are available on the market (Bitner 1992, Bujisic et al. 2015, Oliver 1999). *H5*: Experiential dimensions influence the behavioral intention 'customer feedback'. Customer feedback is information coming directly from customers about satisfaction or dissatisfaction they feel with the experience (Oliver 1997, Soderlund 1998). Customer satisfaction resulting from an experience influences customer feedback and complaining behavior.

### **3. METHODS – EMPIRICAL STUDY**

An empirical study examined the above five hypotheses in the context of NBAs in Republic of South Africa (RSA). These attractions are those whose offering is based on wildlife flora and fauna, including the National Parks and Game Reserves (Sotiriadis et al. 2014). The context of nature-based tourism was selected for two reasons: (i) it

provides a wildlife experience based on African fauna and flora, and (ii) it also includes a set of possible activities involving both passive and active participation by customers.

### **3.1. South Africa: wildlife attractions and game reserves**

RSA has a global competitive advantage in nature-based tourism which is the biggest draw card for the country's main markets. Long haul visitors to RSA mainly visit nature-based and wildlife attractions, such as Game Reserves (GR), National Parks, to enjoy a lifetime experience (Sotiriadis et al. 2014, SA Department of Tourism, 2012). A GR is an area of land set aside for conservation purposes; although is more than just a land to keep wildlife. It is a place where ecosystems are protected and conservation is a key. Indigenous wildlife in its natural habitat makes for an ideal situation as this helps in providing an environment where growth in numbers at a natural rate can occur. There are 79 GRs operating in RSA, mainly in provinces of Limpopo and Mpumalanga, a potential which provides a well distributed and a variety of product offering for the country (Sotiriadis et al. 2014). The above volume doesn't include the 22 national parks managed by South African National Parks. Some GRs provide safari adventure and conservation effort coupled with responsible tourism. The biggest attraction is the 'Big Five' game in Africa - rhinoceros, elephant, buffalo, leopard and lion (SANP, 2013). Game drives or photo safari is the term more commonly used for GRs as it points out that no hunting is involved. It is believed that the factor that determines whether or not a NBA such as GR is successful is how the market responds to its offering. It is therefore vital that GR managers understand their clientele. This issue, and more particularly the customer experience, is increasingly important in designing and offering the appropriate experience to meet customers' needs and business objectives (Hosany and Witham 2010, Merkesdal 2013, Sotiriadis et al. 2014). The aim of the empirical study was to investigate the influence of a wildlife experience on their behavioral intentions. Hence, it analyzed the relationship between the wildlife experience and the related outcomes, using the above research framework.

### **3.2. Methodology and sample**

The above presented research framework was empirically tested by means of a quantitative research (Ladhari 2009). Data were collected from GRs' customers. The sample for the study consisted of customers who had an experience in two GRs, namely Mabula Game Reserve/ Lodge and Sabi-Sabi Game Reserve/Lodges both situated at the northern provinces of RSA. A questionnaire was distributed to their customers when they were waiting for checking out, during the period January – March 2016. A total of 400 questionnaires were filed in and received from these customers. The technique of convenience sampling was justifiable as the study's population required tourists to have experienced wildlife in GRs. The same technique has been used by previous studies investigating the same issue (see, for instance, Hosany and Witham 2010, Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2016). The four experiential dimensions were measured by modifying and adapting the scale of 16 items validated by Oh et al. (2007) (Ali et al. 2016, Su et al. 2016). This measurement scale was adapted successfully by previous studies (Hosany and Witham 2010, Mehmetoglu and Engen 2011, Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2013). Similarly, the 3-item scales measuring perceived quality and satisfaction were drawn from Oh et al. (2007) who constructed the scale to be

generalizable to other tourism contexts. The 16 items were posed on a 7-point Likert scale: strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The examined dimensions of behavioral intentions included WOM, customer loyalty, and customer feedback. The 2 and 3 item scales measuring these post-behavioral intentions were drawn from Ali et al. (2016), Bujisic et al. (2015), Hosany and Witham (2010), Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2013), and Saha and Theingi (2009). These items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale: very unlikely (1) to very likely (7).

### 3.3. Data analysis and findings

The data analysis was performed at two stages. First, a descriptive analysis: for all constructs/dimensions were calculated statistical means and standards deviations and bivariate correlations. Second, a canonical correlation analysis was implied to evaluate the relationship between experience and behavioral intentions (Stamatis 2012). The canonical correlation analysis has been chosen as an adequate method of multivariate statistics. This analysis finds linear relationships among two sets of variables; it is the generalized (i.e. canonical) version of bivariate correlation (Johnson and Wichern 2007, Stamatis 2012). The survey's sample was consisted of GRs' customers at the moment of their checking out procedure. Data regarding the respondents are shown in table 1.

Table 1: **Profile of respondents** [ $n=400$ ]

Characteristics	Sample profile
Gender	Male 54.8% / Female 45.2%
Age group	Majority formed of two groups: 45–54 years (44.2%) and 35–44 years (20.9%)
Education level	Mainly Tertiary (57.8%) / Secondary (28.3%)
Nationality / Country of residence	78.5% SA residents / 12.2% overseas (mainly Europe, USA and Canada) / 5.6% (India) /3.7% other African countries
Duration of stay	1 overnights (25.6%) / 2 overnights (51.4%) / 3 overnights (16.7%) / 4 overnights and longer (6.3%)
Party size	Alone (3.1%) / Couples (29.2%) / Family (22.6%) / Friends (19.3%) / Groups (25.8%)

Source: Author

The results of confirmatory factors analysis are shown in table 2. This measurement model included the measures of the four dimensions of experience, the two outcomes, as well as the three post-behavioral intentions. Thus, the model structure could be assessed comprehensively (Oh et al. 2007).

Table 2: Measurement items and descriptive statistics

Experience dimensions and measurement items	Mean (SD)	Composite reliability	Variance extracted	Cronbach's <i>alpha</i>
1. Education	3.94	0.86	0.76	0.94
2. Esthetics	5.64	0.79	0.63	0.82
3. Entertainment	4.08	0.90	0.82	0.78
4. Escapism	5.89	0.86	0.67	0.93
5. Overall perceived quality	6.39	0.93	0.87	0.89
6. Customer satisfaction	6.46	0.86	0.91	0.92
7. Word-of-mouth	6.39	0.89	0.81	0.94
8. Repurchase intention	5.69	0.85	0.76	0.89
9. Customer feedback	3.79	0.79	0.85	0.93

Source: Author

All Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values were above 0.70 indicating reliability (Johnson and Wichern 2007, Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2013). Composite reliability was higher than 0.70 as well. These indices are shown in table 2. Each construct's average variance extracted was higher than 0.50, thus supporting unidimensionality (Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2016). Factor loadings were higher than 0.59 and statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) supporting convergent validity (Oh et al. 2007). A test of validity of the four experience dimensions was performed based on the measurement model (Table 3) by examining the relationships between the examined variables.

Table 3: Correlations matrix: Experience dimensions and outcomes variables

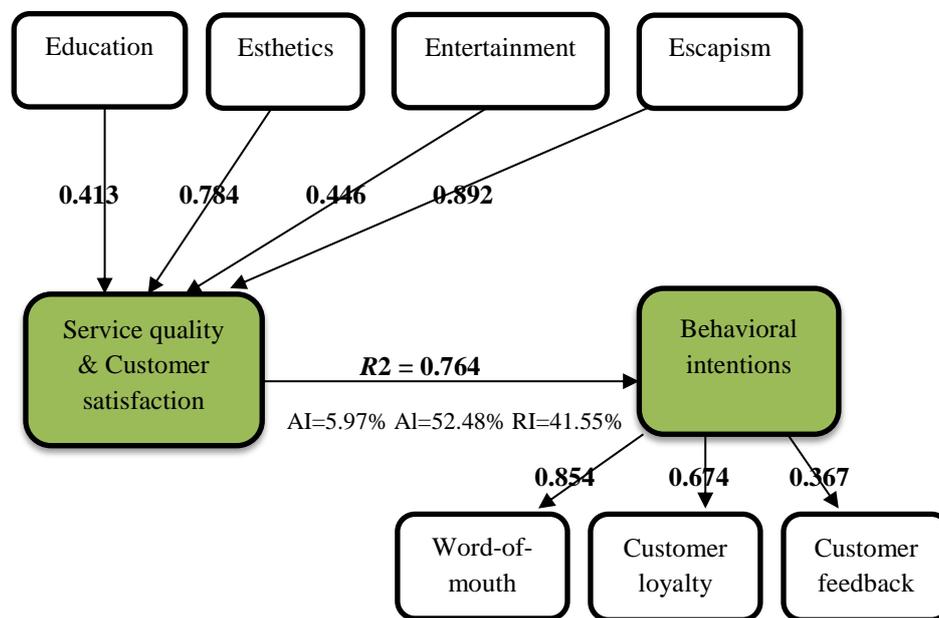
Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>1 Education</b>	1.00								
<b>2 Esthetics</b>	0.57	1.00							
<b>3 Entertainment</b>	0.68	0.42	1.00						
<b>4 Escapism</b>	0.52	0.38	0.73	1.00					
<b>5 Perceived quality</b>	0.45	<b>0.72</b>	0.62	<b>0.82</b>	1.00				
<b>6 Satisfaction</b>	0.39	<b>0.69</b>	0.38	<b>0.78</b>	0.83	1.00			
<b>7 WOM</b>	0.76	0.86	0.65	0.85	0.89	0.91	1.00		
<b>8 Loyalty</b>	0.72	0.82	0.42	0.84	0.86	0.82	0.85	1.00	
<b>9 Customer feedback</b>	0.38	0.44	0.33	0.39	0.44	0.45	0.49	0.32	1.00

Source: Author

Table 3 is the correlation matrix between-construct (experience dimensions and outcomes) that shows moderate correlations among the four experiential dimensions and the moderate to high correlations among the outcome and consequence variables. Results from the measurement model collectively suggest that the dimensions and variables of the model were measured reliably (Oh et al. 2007). As it can be seen, all correlations between the four experiential dimensions and the other variables were statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that the experience dimensions had implications for the perceived service quality and overall customer satisfaction, as well as for post-consumption behavioral intentions (Oh et al. 2007). The escapist dimension seemed to be the dominant determinant of the experiential outcomes. The esthetics also had positive effects, but less important. The other two dimensions – education and entertainment – did not have effects on perceived experience quality and overall

customer satisfaction. As for the post-behavioral intentions, the strongest relationship was between the experience outcomes and the WOM and customer loyalty. On the contrary, the relationship between the experience outcomes and the customer feedback was relatively weak. It looks like customers didn't wish to share their comments with the service provider. This study used canonical correlation analysis to evaluate the relationship between experiential dimensions, related outcomes and post-behavioral intentions (figure 1).

Figure 1: **Canonical correlation between experience dimensions, outcomes and behavioral intentions**



Source: Author

From factor loading, it is obvious that the escapist dimension had the highest correlation with overall perceived quality, meaning that it is the most influencing dimension in providing customer satisfaction with wildlife experience. The second dimension having positive effects is esthetics, but less important than the escapism. The other two dimensions do not have effects on experience outcomes. The canonical correlation's findings provide partially support for H1. It was found that only the dimensions of escapism and esthetics are determining these outcomes; the first one was the dominant one. Therefore, the H1 is partially confirmed. As for the hypothesis H2, the canonical correlation coefficient between experience and behavioral intentions was 0.764, indicating a high degree of positive correlation. High perceived service quality and satisfactory wildlife experience seemed to significantly enhance their post-behavioral intentions. Regarding the correlation between overall behavioral intentions and the three dimensions, it appeared that WOM was the highest rated. Therefore, hypotheses H3 and H4 were confirmed. Finally, regarding the last hypothesis H5

(Satisfaction from a wildlife experience influences the behavioral intention “Customer feedback), analysis results did not provide support; it seemed that this correlation is weak. Providing feedback (positive comments and negative comments/complaints) to the service provider is not in the priorities of customers and this is not a good indicator

#### **4. CONCLUSION AND MARKETING IMPLICATIONS**

The present paper investigated the wildlife experience in NBAs and the related outcomes. Findings of this study indicate that the experience economy constitutes a practical measurement framework for the study of wildlife experiences. The empirical investigation with quantitative research showed the important role this experience plays in creation of overall perceived service, customer satisfaction and post-behavioral intentions (Ali et al. 2016). The study’s findings are valuable in the sense that: (i) they provide insights for the NBAs on the dimensions that influence wildlife experiences; (ii) they may have marketing implications; and (iii) they indicate direction for future research.

The measurement scale used was an adaptation of that suggested by Oh et al. (2007). This scale was proved to be reliable and valid. Results of the present study demonstrate that the experience economy offers a conceptual framework and a practical measurement scale for the analysis of tourist experience, confirming findings of previous studies (Bujisic et al. 2015, Hosany and Witham 2010, Mehmetoglu and Engen 2011, Oh et al. 2007, Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2013, Su et al. 2016). Our research extends existing theory by incorporating new elements and empirically investigating them within a new context. This study identified the relationships between the four experiential dimensions and outcomes of positive overall perceived quality, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Findings indicate that the escapist dimension is the most determining dimension; it had the greatest influence on a high quality wildlife experience. The esthetic dimension was influencing as well, but in lesser degree. The escapist dimension was the dominant determinant of the experiential outcomes (perceived quality and satisfaction) and in predicting WOM and customer loyalty toward the NBA. The dominant role of escapist dimension and the significant influence (second in order of influence) of esthetic dimension in nature-based tourism are consistent with results of only one study (Mehmetoglu and Engen 2011) within the context of an event. In the four other studies on visitor attractions in general by Bujisic et al. (2015), on cruising experience by Hosany and Witham (2010), on lodging experience by Oh et al. (2007), and on wine tourism experience by Quadri-Felitti and Fiori (2013) the esthetic experience was the most determining dimension in achieving customer satisfaction and the largest predictor for behavioral intentions (Su et al. 2016). Thus, it could be stressed that the results of the present study support Oh et al. (2007) opinion that tourist consumers seek and expect different experiential attributes in different contexts based on their motivations; an opinion shared by previous studies (Bujisic et al. 2015, Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2013).

Regarding the post-consumption behavioral intentions, it is confirmed that WOM and customer loyalty are positively influenced by overall perceived quality and customer satisfaction. This finding is similar to that by Bujisic et al. (2015) indicating the very

strong relationship between satisfaction, WOM and return intention. As for the third dimension, customer feedback (positive and negative), it was found that this dimension was not statistically significant. Further, it was found that escapism had the greatest influence in predicting WOM and clientele loyalty. The esthetic dimension was found to be important, but in lower degree, it had a significant role in post-behavioral intentions. These findings are conflicting with the findings on previous studies: in the case of cruise experience, entertainment was determining dimension of intention to recommend (Hosany and Witham 2010), and the esthetic dimension for destination loyalty in the case of wine tourism (Quadri-Felitti and Fiori 2013 and 2016). The dimension of customer feedback had not been examined by previous studies.

The study's findings show the relative importance of the four experience dimensions. Each dimension of the experience framework points to clear directions for managerial attention and marketing actions (Oh et al. 2007, Quadri-Felitti and Fiore 2013). The providers of nature-based tourism, such as GRs, should focus on the elements and attributes of their experiences offering that provide opportunities for a 'getaway' from daily routine and feeling in harmony with the natural and built settings. At the same time, they have to emphasize on other dimensions, the entertainment and education must not be neglected. The attributes of these two experiential dimensions should be reconsidered and redesigned appropriately in order to offer customers integrated experiences (Tung and Ritchie 2011). From a managerial perspective, NBAs should enhance the two experiential dimensions, in operational terms, and improve their offering in terms of the escapist and esthetic experiences. These elements and attributes must be emphasized in marketing activities and actions by providers of wildlife experiences (Breiby 2015). Marketing communications of NBAs have to emphasize the escapist and esthetic dimensions and related attributes, without neglecting the other two dimensions, entertainment and education. There is always room for improvement in all aspects; an endless managerial and marketing task aiming at delighting customers. All elements and attributes may contribute to a memorable experience; therefore, NBAs should provide their clientele with a multifaceted / full experience based on all four dimensions, with the suitable blending, and cater to accordingly.

Furthermore, the study contributed to identify the influence of the four dimensions of experience on post-behavioral intentions of customers. The results indicate that satisfied customers are willing to share this experience with friends and relatives and recommend (off and online reviews) the provider of nature-based tourism services. The same stands for customer loyalty, although not at the same extent. It seemed that satisfied customers, influenced by a rewarding experience, are keen to share it and recommend the GR, as well as to remain loyal to. However, it was found that customers were not intending to provide feedback to service provider. It appeared that customers prefer sharing their experience and complaints with friends, relatives and peers instead of complaining to the business. There are two possible explanations: (i) enterprises do not implement the adequate tools to get customer feedback; and/or (ii) customers estimate that providing business with feedback, it is useless. In any case, enterprises miss one source of information for service recovery and improvements. They should reconsider and readapt their managerial approach in this field, and use the appropriate techniques. One simple general questionnaire gives customers the impression that it is useless, not allowing them express properly themselves. The

study's findings indicated that NBAs offering a wildlife experience should devote their energy and resources, and strive for designing and creating attractive experiences that appeal to tourists, emphasizing the right dimensions that appeal more to their customers. The core value of tourism is based on the experience, which leads to the creation of customers' satisfaction and post-consumption intentions.

This study contributed to our knowledge of the experience framework in the field of tourism; however, it entails some limitations. First, as for the research design, study was limited to two GRs in RSA and interviews were conducted during a specific time period. Thus, different locations and destinations must be studied. Secondly the convenience sampling was used. The research design focused on tourists who had a stay in GRs in RSA, therefore tourists capable to evaluate their wildlife experience. The profile of the research sample doesn't allow generalizing the study's results. Other studies should be undertaken in other tourism contexts. Future research could also look at the validity of the experience framework in other tourism settings, for instance seaside holidays and all-inclusive resorts (Hosany and Witham 2010). Researchers should consider and use an adapted measurement scale in order to investigate the framework in other contexts, such as cultural tourism, urban tourism and gastronomic tourism. Another interesting avenue for future research would be to focus on the measurement instrument, and incorporate and assess some additional variables, such as emotions, novelty, service encounter and degree of involvement (Oh et al. 2007), with the aim to improve our understanding of the relationships between experiential dimensions, consumption outcomes and post-consumption behavioral intentions. Future research could investigate the role of these factors in crafting tourists' experiences and their effects on experience outcomes, as suggested by Hosany and Witham (2010). Finally, the offering of NBAs is not the same across the globe; it is based on different attributes depending on country and region. Further studies may also adopt and use the same measurement scale in similar NBAs, but in other destinations to allow a comparative analysis and make more robust the findings of the present study.

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