



# Consumer experience and the valued elements in the three phases of purchase of a cultural event

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## Abstract

Consumer experience has been a central point for marketing researchers, but also a complex subject that seeks to integrate multiple relevant and enduring concepts of literature. In this sense there are numerous publications and perspectives on the subject, but the need to identify and understand the origins of the experience and consumer behaviour has been highlighted by many authors. In this sense, the article addresses the consumer experience globally, having as main objective the identification, categorization and understanding of the main elements that consumers value during their experience in an event. The analysis allowed to highlight the elements and attributes that influenced (positively and negatively) the consumer experience along the different touchpoints existing in the three phases of purchase. An exploratory and interpretative approach was adopted based on a case study of the “*Óbidos Christmas Town*” event. This qualitative research adopted netnography as a methodological technique and analyzed the comments present on *TripAdvisor*. The selection process resulted in a total of 153 comments valid for analysis. The results revealed different elements through the three phases of purchase. In the pre-purchase phase consumers valued elements: a) functional/motivational; b) communicative; c) technological and d) elements of interaction between consumers. In the purchase phase they valued as elements: a) interaction with the service; b) interaction with employees; c) atmospheric elements, and d) elements of process; while in the post-purchase they valued technological elements and elements of interaction between consumers. This article provides a comprehensive understanding and helps events organizations in identifying key elements and respective touchpoints along the consumer experience in an event.

**Keywords** Consumer experience · Elements/attributes of the experience · Purchase phases · Consumer · Event

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## 1 Introduction

Understanding consumer experience has been a central point for marketing researchers which has contributed to countless publications and perspectives. Considering different epistemological and ontological origins, the experience has been characterized in the literature in three ways: as a process, a result or a phenomenon (Helkkula 2011). The experience based on the *process* implies the understanding of the several elements and phases that are interconnected to experiential learning (Edvardsson et al. 2005). The authors consider that this approach applies mainly to innovation and design services, where understanding the formation of consumer experience in the system is a requirement for the successful development of services and environments; where the experiences are established through the clients' responses to the various elements and encounters (Jaakkola et al. 2015). The design and management of the consumer experience require the existence of several elements that work in a holistic way to meet or exceed expectations, that is, the delivery of value to the client requires a cross-functional perspective (Bitner et al. 2008). The experience have also been presented based on the *results* being considered as antecedent or consequence of other constructions (Helkkula 2011). This approach was used by many pieces of research that focused on service management and marketing and sought to understand how organizations can delineate and manage their experiences to create competitive advantage. Thus, it became very important to identify the factors that affect the experience (Doom et al. 2010; Verhoef et al. 2009), as well as the creation of performance variables (Klaus and Maklan 2012). Employee's behavior and attitudes, the environment, interpersonal relationships, and technical quality emerge as elements that influence and have a direct impact on clients' experiences (Bharwani and Jauhari 2013). This research field has focused on how experiences are co-created within encounters and relationships between the organization and its consumers, which means that the parties can directly influence the experiences and value processes of each other (Grönroos 2008). Finally, the experience can be based on a *phenomenological* perspective, highlighting the service-dominant logic, the service logic and consumer culture theory. This perspective is a very useful lens when one intends to understand the experience of consumer value creating, as opposed to focusing on the attempts of the organizations to incorporate value in the market offers or to appropriate the values created by the consumers (Kelleher and Peppard 2011).

The discourse around the service-dominant logic has drawn attention in the experience of the consumer on the premise that the value is singular and phenomenologically determined by the consumer (Vargo and Lusch 2008). The experience is considered to be subjective and context-specific (Vargo and Lusch 2008; Helkkula et al. 2012). This scenario highlights the active and proactive role of consumers in creating value that can individually and collectively influence where, when and how value is created (Kelleher and Peppard 2011; Grönroos 2011). Service logic reveals that value co-creation requires process between parties, so that each party can influence the processes of the other (Chen et al. 2012; Grönroos and Voima 2013). It concerns an emerging research area that is extremely relevant to interactive services (Bolton and Saxena-Iyer 2009) as it highlights the role of factual service encounters and focuses on direct interactions between actors (Helkkula et al. 2012). On the other hand, consumer culture theory deals with socio-cultural, symbolic, and experiential aspects of consumption (Arnould and

Thompson 2005), allowing the exploitation of the hedonic and emotional reactions of the consumers, as well as their thoughts, feelings and senses in relation to the experiences (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Arnould and Price 1993). This approach considers that consumers live in a culture that mixes different groups and meanings shared by consumers, where they themselves are part of an interconnected system of produced products and images that they use in building their identity and in the orientation of relationships with others, acting as partners.

In this way, it is verified that the consumer experience is a complex theme that seeks to integrate several relevant and enduring concepts of marketing and services literature (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). There are numerous publications and perspectives on the subject, but the need to identify and understand the origins and factors of consumer behavior has been highlighted by many authors, especially because consumer experience is considered a determining factor for the success of organizations (Geus et al. 2016). The Marketing Science Institute (2016; 2018) sees consumer experience as one of the major research challenges of the coming years and, in this sense, this article provides new insights and research scenarios at the consumer experience level at events. This article focuses on cultural event experiences as distinct from day-to-day consumers' experiences, happening outside the context of "normal" life (Walls et al. 2011). Robertson and Frew (2013) regard events and festivals as "*prime manifestations*" of the experience economy, which are gaining social and economic relevance as they contribute to the animation and social cohesion of a city/region, and mainly for the satisfaction of consumers (Vliet 2012). Cultural organizations are increasingly redefining the role played by the consumer from a passive observer to an interactive actor in the cultural experience (Mencarelli et al. 2010). As result, the cultural sector is facing significant challenges being necessary the focus on the consumer experience (Minkiewicz et al. 2016). Gaining a better understanding of experiences, and providing a solid base for definition and operationalization, would make it possible to investigate what experiences are most important to consumers (Geus et al. 2016), being the objective of this article. The article addresses the consumer experience globally, having as main objective the identification, categorization, definition and understanding of the main elements that consumers value during their experience in an event. Five sections were structured: the first one refers to the present introduction, the second one presents the literature review, the third one refers to the methodology of the research where all methodological procedures of the netnography were focused, the fourth section concerns the presentation and discussion of the results, and in the last section come the main conclusions, implications, limitations and future lines of research.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Consumer experience and the phases of purchase

The concept of consumer experience has entered the field of consumption and marketing through the seminal article by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) where consumers were not only responsible for rational decisions but also for involvement with the service in an emotional way, giving them subjective meanings. Despite this finding, the dissemination of consumer experience occurred only in the late 1990s with

the concept of the experience economy of Pine and Gilmore (1998) which specifically addressed the importance of experiences in today's society and the opportunities for organizations to create strong and durable experiences to consumers. Schmitt (1999) emphasized the importance of this concept and focused on a broader perspective where consumer experience in a holistic way incorporates all the cognitive, sensory, social, emotional, and spiritual responses of consumer interaction with the organization (Gentile et al. 2007; Verhoef et al. 2009; Keyser et al. 2015).

In this sense, the experiences are formed based on the perception of all the moments of contact with the different actors of a certain journey, and they do not refer only to the interactions during the purchase, but to the whole process of value co-creation before, during and after a service:

- *Pre-purchase phase*: the first phase of the process involves aspects of consumer interaction with the brand, attributes, and environments prior to a purchase transaction (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), that is, it refers to the consumer's experience before starting the true service (Rosenbaum et al. 2017). Traditional literature considers characteristic behaviour: the recognition of needs/objectives, research, impulses and reflections or considerations (Puccinelli et al. 2009) that indicate the consumer's choices and preferences for a specific path (Keyser et al. 2015). In this way, consumers select a set of actors that will contribute to the achievement of the desired results (Chandler and Lusch 2015). This phase is evaluated based on the resources available to consumers (Beck and Palmatier 2013) and their predisposition to the past, present and future (Helkkula et al. 2012). These evaluations can be challenging, since customers only have access to a limited set of options as a means of comparison (Dar-Nimrod et al. 2009), use simple heuristics to make choices and are driven by the threshold of acceptability that results from satisfaction behaviour (Schwartz et al. 2002) or by emotions, as opposed to deliberate and conscious reasoning about the different options available (Jüttner et al. 2013). Thus, the intensity and level of conscious perception by which this process occurs depend on the prominence of the service exchange and the context in which the consumer is immersed (Keyser et al. 2015).
- *Purchase phase*: this second stage received significant attention in the literature and highlights all consumer interactions with the brand and the environment during the purchase event (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), translating into actual consumer experience (Keyser et al. 2015; Rosenbaum et al. 2017). After reflections and first choices, consumers actively engage in a sequence of events where each event or action manifests as a specific experience for the consumer and, consequently, contributes to the outcome of the immediate encounter with the surrounding environment. In this way, Chandler and Lusch (2015) characterize the purchasing phase as the specific and immediate experiences of events that occur as a result of consumer involvement in service exchanges. This involvement is acquiring various intensities throughout their journey (Brodie et al. 2011) since it depends on the determination in relation to a certain objective (Sansone and Thoman 2006) of the occurrence of numerous factors (Higgins and Scholer 2009) and, mainly, the hedonic behaviour of the consumer (Andajani 2015). The experience depends on the resources of the consumer, the dynamic flow between previous events and the conditions in which the event occurs (Keyser et al. 2015).

- *Post-purchase phase*: the third step involves all consumer interactions with the brand and its environment after the actual purchase (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Rosenbaum et al. 2017). In practical terms, this phase covers aspects of the post-purchase consumer experience that relate in some way to the product or service itself. In this way, each event is marked by an individual reflection or judgment about the actual value obtained (Vargo and Lusch 2008; Keyser et al. 2015) which according to Higgins and Scholer (2009) can be distinguished between value from the process and value from the end state. Value from the process is based on the activities that allow the pursuit of the objectives, that is, it considers the sequence of actions that determine the desired final state. On the other hand, the value from the end state reflects the nature and experience of the outcome. Huang and Zhang (2013) stress that difficulties in achieving a goal may result in a negative value for the process but also a negative reflection on the value of the result; resulting in consequences for the consumer experience and future implications. In this sense, Keyser et al. (2015) warn that intensity and conscious perceptions of the value depend on clients, situations and progress along the pursuit of the goal; there may be events/actions with a low impact on the value from the process and the value of the result, but there may also be events/actions that will contribute to positive and meaningful reflections. For gaining a better understanding of experiences, and providing a solid base for definition and operationalization, it's necessary to investigate what experiences, characteristics, resources and elements are most important to consumers throughout the three purchasing phases. In this sense, the article addresses the consumer experience globally, having as main objective the identification, categorization, definition and understanding of the main elements that consumers value during their experience in an event.

## 2.2 Cultural event experiences

Events have been defined as a onetime or infrequently occurring event of limited duration that provides the consumer with a leisure and social opportunity beyond everyday experience (Geus et al. 2016). Their special appeal stems from the innate uniqueness of each event, which differentiates them from fixed attractions, and their ambience, which elevates them above ordinary life. Vliet (2012) defines them as a gathering of a relatively large crowd in a specific public place for a delineated period, during which visitors are offered an unique experience (planned and organized with a purpose), including transformation and play elements, making it possible for visitors to behave and feel differently than in daily lives. The definitions entail for example music, sports, cultural and art events; they're bound in space and time, and therefore are very suitable for the study of discrete experiences. This article will focus on cultural event experiences which are distinct from day-to-day experiences, happening outside the context of everyday routines.

Events are becoming increasingly important, and experiences are the central part of events, whether they are cultural, sporting or business events (Richards 2017). The growing number of event and festivals can be explained by the fact that the spending of leisure time has changed: people spend more time outdoors, are more often together with other people and are willing to travel more (Vliet 2012). They're an interesting

tool to promote experiences because consumers have the opportunity to become actively involved in areas of personal interest and interaction processes that are not possible in daily life (Vila-López and Rodríguez-Molina 2013). That way, people attend events because in spite of the increase in virtual contact, they still crave the live experiences and shared moments that events can create (Richards 2017). Particularly in the sphere of services marketing event marketing shows high potential, given service properties like intangibility or heterogeneity (Vila-López and Rodríguez-Molina 2013). Unfortunately, the literature on event experiences is very scarce and fragmented (Geus et al. 2016), hence the need to deepen the overall consumer experience of cultural events. With a more holistic approach to conceptualize event experiences, consumers are more satisfied, they obtain superior value and this leads to a competitive advantage for the companies. In this way, events serve more and more as experience marketing tools to achieve goals for cities, regions and companies (Vliet 2012). In general, event marketing can help companies to achieve corporate objectives (increasing public awareness, corporate image, community involvement), marketing objectives (reaching target markets, brand positioning, increasing sales), media objectives (generating visibility, generating publicity and counter negative publicity, enhancing ad campaigns), as well as personal objectives (Zarantonello and Schmitt 2013).

### 3 Methodology

In order to identify, categorize and understand the elements that consumers value most in the context of an event, throughout their experience, netnography was used as a methodological technique for the selection and collection of freely expressed comments by users<sup>1</sup> of *TripAdvisor* who visited the event “*Óbidos Christmas Town*” (OCT).<sup>2</sup> For Kozinets (2002) this is the best method to examine consumer experience, since it is less intrusive and driven by the observations of individuals in a context that is not produced by researchers. With traditional methods - *focus groups and interviews* - the researcher’s presence will affect and disrupt the natural and normal practices of everyday life. These advantages have great impact on the choice of the technique used. Although there is no rigidity in the composition of netnographic researches, and of being an open form of research, the five Kozinets (2002) procedures were followed:

- *Cultural Entrée*: the research of online review platforms was performed through *Google* using the word combination of: “*Óbidos Christmas Town*” and “*experience*”. As a result, came the platform *Google Maps* and the platform of *TripAdvisor*. The analysis carried out on these two platforms showed that

<sup>1</sup> In this article, are assumed to be synonymous words «*user*» and «*consumer*»

<sup>2</sup> OCT is an event held annually in the village of Óbidos in Portugal. It takes place in December in the outdoor space of the Castle, in open field, in a scenario with very own characteristics. From year to year the organization change the theme of the event, but still guarantee many craft establishments, exhibitions and medieval sensations of this Village so enigmatic, even before entering the enclosure. For children and adults all the fun is guaranteed after entering the venue with many games, activities, amusements, shows and entertainment everywhere. The motto of the organization emphasizes that: “*Christmas is the time to open the ark of memories, to travel back in time and to be a new child, to live in family and to remember the good old days, as we draw new dreams in the company of those who are dearest*”.



the comments made by the users of the *Google Maps* were not in accordance with the criteria recommended by Kozinets, they presented a telegraphic format which did not allow to draw meaningful conclusions. In this way, all the comments about the “*Óbidos Christmas Town*” event that existed on *TripAdvisor* were collected. The choice was also based on being one of the largest and most recognized platforms for sharing and researching travel/activity reviews, this is, tourism and event experiences.

- *Collection and selection of data:* it was decided to transcribe the comments of *TripAdvisor* users. In this way, in *TripAdvisor*'s website, “*Óbidos, Portugal*” was entered and the field related to “*activities*” was selected. Thirty-two attractions/activities emerged, and the one referring to “*Christmas Town*” was chosen – which corresponded to a total of 187 evaluations<sup>3</sup> made since 2011. Of the various filters on the platform, the option of “*all languages*” was selected. Of the total comments were deleted: 1) those that only allude to the Village of Óbidos in general, i.e., those that did not refer to the experience in the event; 2) the telegraphic comments, because they became inconclusive; e 3) the comments of Dutch, Russian and Polish origin for not being sure of the translated content. In total, 153 comments were valid for analysis. In order to exist a richness/heterogeneity of comments all the years available in the platform *TripAdvisor* were considered; being a time horizon from 2011 to 2017. The available data were obtained through *NCapture for NVIVO*; having been processed and analyzed by *PLUS NVIVO 11 software*.
- *Analysis and interpretation of data:* after identifying the comments directly related to the objective of the research the analysis of content was carried out. The procedure to perform the content analysis was mostly categorization that consisted of the breakdown of the comment into categories, that is, the attributes that existed in the comments by similarity of meanings and recurrence in the discourse were grouped, generating categories of elements/resources that users most appreciated in their overall experience of the event. To determine the reliability of the coding performed in the content analysis it was necessary to verify if there was stability, i.e., if the content had been coded more than once. This situation ended up being confirmed, discarding, in this way, the existence of problems of codification of content.
- *Research ethics:* Kozinets (2002) states that researchers using this method are required to consider and follow some ethical guidelines that turn into two nontrivial, contestable and interrelated concerns: 1) online forums are public or private websites? and 2) in cyberspace what constitutes “*informed consent*”? These issues are marked by the lack of unanimity among researchers (Kozinets 2002; Haggerty 2004; Rageh et al. 2013). However, the authors consider that these guidelines make sense, especially for semi-private online communications. In this sense, Langer and Beckman (2005) argue that the evaluation frameworks are open to researchers because they are public means of communication, and thus are subject to academic analysis without the need for an ethical review (Haggerty 2004). Since the platform used in this research is considered a public forum, users' consent was not required.

<sup>3</sup> Until 1 March 2018 there were 187 comments on the *TripAdvisor* platform.

- *Verification of members*: this last step concerns the control of members, which is the process for presenting the results of the research to the participants involved, in order to ask for opinions on the interpretations of the results obtained by the researcher (Kozinets 2002). However, it should be noted that this research was conducted in a discreet way, where the analysis and interpretation of the results were translated into the finalization of this qualitative study, that is, this step was not verified.

### 3.1 Information about the sample

Table 1 shows the information<sup>4</sup> on the sample. Male users have expressed themselves more (53,6%) than female users (46,4%). The majority of the comments had national origin (61,44%), but it has also been proven that many of the users have not made this information available publicly (20,26%); the remaining comments were of foreign origin (a comment from California, Columbia, Canada, Croatia, Helsinki, Switzerland, UK and France; while there were thirteen from Brazil and seven from Spain). In relation to age, it was found that almost half of the users (47%) decided not to make this information available. Of the users who reported it, the majority were in the 35–49 age group (26%) and between the ages of 25 and 34 (15%). The classifications attributed by consumers ranged from “*terrible*” to “*excellent*”, but with the preeminence of the classification “*reasonable*” (27%). The level of collaborator<sup>5</sup> ranged from the minimum to the highest level, with a preeminence of level 3 (27%) and level 5 (23%). The level that has the greatest impact at the point and reader level is owned by 23 users (15%); while level 1 is only held by 8%. However, and as Kozinets (2002, p.7) mentions: “*the online landscape uniquely changeable and dynamic mediates social representation, making problematic the issue of the identity of informants*”. That is, users may want to present a significantly different identity to their real identities (Rageh et al. 2013). In this sense, these data are merely informative and should not be taken as the characterization of the sample.

Taking into consideration the possible categories on the *TripAdvisor* platform, 102 users mentioned that they shared the event with their family, 33 with their spouse, 17 with their friends and only one attended the event alone. It was verified that the experience shared with the spouse was the one that presented the worst results, where 36% of users attributed “*terrible*”, with the same weighting, 36% of users attributed the classification of “*weak*” and 34% assigned the classification “*reasonable*”. On the other hand, the greatest satisfaction was felt by users who attended the event with their friends or family members, of whom more than half rated the experience as “*very good*” or “*excellent*” (“58% of the friend’s category and 52% of the family category).

<sup>4</sup> The information presented relates to the profile of users on the *TripAdvisor* platform. Not all information is mandatory, such as: the user’s age and origin.

<sup>5</sup> The contributions users make to *TripAdvisor* are worth points. The number of points determines the level of the collaborator, and there are six levels in total: level 1  $\geq$  300 points; level 2  $\geq$  500 points; level 3  $\geq$  1000 points; level 4  $\geq$  2500 points; level 5  $\geq$  5000 points and level 6  $\geq$  10,000 points. At level 6 users represent greater reliability and trust for the remaining users.



**Table 1** Information on the sample of valid comments from the *TripAdvisor* ( $N=153$ )

Gender	Age		Classification			Collaborator's Level	
Feminine	71	18–24	8	Terrible	15	Level 1	12
Masculine	82	25–34	23	Weak	23	Level 2	16
ORIGIN		35–49	40	Reasonable	42	Level 3	41
Portugal	94	50–64	9	Very Good	37	Level 4	26
Foreign	28	≥ 65	1	Excellent	36	Level 5	35
Not available	31	Not available	72			Level 6	23

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Elements valued by users of the *TripAdvisor*

#### 4.1.1 Pre-purchase phase

In the first phase of purchase, users value four groups of elements/attributes: a) functional and motivational; b) communicative; c) technological and d) elements of interaction between consumers.

- 1) *Functional and motivational elements*: serve as motivation for users to make leisure trips and can be classified as *endogenous* when they concern internal reasons/motives or *exogenous* when they involve particularities external to consumers. In this sense, users considered as exogenous factors of differentiation and of increased importance: the location of the event, the road infrastructures, the scheduling and the fact that it is a thematic event that takes place during the Christmas season. These factors depend on the reasons raised by the specific destinations (Crompton 1979) where the presumed image, the existing activities and the benefits allied to the activities are situational factors essential to the decision of the participation of the consumers in an experience (Andersen et al. 2000; Prayag and Ryan 2011). Having proved that the fact that the event, in itself, “*being in the village of Óbidos*” and this being “*a charming village*”, “*very beautiful, friendly*” and with a “*magnificent view*” led many users to participate in the event. However, it was verified that most of the comments had an endogenous perspective, manifesting the main internal reasons/motives for attending the event:

- Weekend with family or with friends
- Previous satisfactory experiences
- Program for a different family day
- A trip/walk/family moment
- Curiosity factor about the size of the event over the years
- Take advantage of the mini Christmas holidays and experience for children
- To celebrate the New Year and participate in “*Christmas Town*”
- Required waypoint in the road map

According to Andersen et al. (2000), the endogenous factors relate to internal forces that motivate or create the desire to satisfy a need to travel/participate, that is, indicate the main reason for the behaviour. These factors can be characterized as sociopsychological and include the desire for relaxation, escape from routine, adventure, emotion, prestige, novelty, education and social interaction (Crompton 1979; Pearce 2005; Prayag and Ryan 2011). The satisfactory participation in previous editions of the event also came as a reference for many users. According to Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) consumers rely on past experience to support and make faster purchasing decisions, spending less time collecting and searching for information in the existing media. Past interaction with service plays an important role in the consumer experience. In this sense, we conclude that consumer choices are not based only on functional elements, but also on symbolic elements (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Despite the differences between the perspectives, the division into behaviors purely utilitarian or hedonic becomes difficult, since almost all consumer situations involve aspects related to utility, perceived value and consumer prudence (utilitarian aspects), as well as aspects that refer to the experienced and anticipated pleasure of the buying behavior (Ahtola 1985; Gentile et al. 2007). This situation was evidenced through the comments of the users who referred more than a decisive element to the participation in the event, indicating clearly the necessity of a balance between the utilitarian and hedonistic value.

- 2) *Communicative elements*: elements that contribute to the organization's communication with the consumer. In this phase of pre-purchase, the media were elements with great influence, positive and negative, in the experience of *TripAdvisor* users. It was confirmed that users appreciated the existence of information, clarification and better solutions on the part of the organization, but also on the part of other consumers. Before attending the event, users tried to deepen their knowledge about the event and were particularly attentive to information/opinions on social networks. It is important to emphasize that in many cases, clarifications and information on the Internet influenced the purchase decisions about the service (some users even gave up on going to the event and shared comments of a negative nature). The media are crucial vehicles for the promotion of events, but also for greater contact with consumers. In this sense, social networks have the objective of permanent contact in real time, facilitating the delivery of information and better solutions to consumers. However, messages can be perceived incorrectly and contribute to the opposite effect (Stein and Ramaseshan 2016). The authors point out that these elements are related to the direct interaction in the different touchpoints, resulting in beneficial impacts (eases and conveniences) or detrimental impacts that result in agitations and frustrations that will negatively affect the entire consumer experience. The existence of discounts was also an attribute mentioned by some users who acquired the tickets in the *online* platforms. The existence of messages and promotional content is a distinctive factor with great importance and influence in this phase. In view of the appealing messages of the organization of the event, users make decisions and make purchases in the media they dominate (technological means). According to the results obtained, the consumer observes regularly and carefully all the content made available by the organization. These messages are mostly one-way communication and of

promotional/informative character and play an essential role in the search and evaluation phases of consumer experience (Stein and Ramaseshan 2016); although these communicative elements are also important in the purchase and post-purchase phase of the event.

- 3) *Technological elements*: are characterized as features of direct interaction of the consumer with any type of technology and, at this stage, websites play an essential role for the current consumers (Srivastava and Kaul 2014; Stein and Ramaseshan 2016). The growing demand/awareness of consumers contributed to the development of their initiatives/skills, becoming a differentiating and essential factor in purchasing decisions. Thus, it has been proven that the purchase of tickets online is an element that the consumers of the event value a lot, since they can use their knowledge or capabilities to make the purchase. In this sense, the users emphasized the convenience and ease that the process involves, opting for this feature to purchase the tickets and avoid queuing or waiting times on the day of the event. The comments demonstrate a proactive attitude of the users, revealing a great consideration and attention on trends, but especially in the search for clarifications and solutions that are more advantageous, manifesting themselves in individual initiatives according to the needs and preferences of the consumers. For Srivastava and Kaul (2014) the convenience associated with “shopping” is one of the factors that contribute most to a good shopping experience since it is the ability to reduce non-monetary costs (time, energy and effort) when buying and using products/services (Berry et al. 2002). In this way, the actions or steps that clients take to achieve a result play an extremely important role in the perceptions and evaluations of the various touchpoints (Stein and Ramaseshan 2016), but especially in the pre-purchase phase if tickets are purchased on the online platforms. In digital environments, consumers highlighted process elements related to ease of use (Kim and Stoel 2004), as well as the responsiveness and opportunities of technological elements (Yang and Jun 2002).
- 4) *Elements of interaction between consumers*: the recommendation of family and friends who had attended the event in previous editions was an element that had great influence in this phase. In this sense, it was verified that the consumer-consumer interaction, which consisted of the appreciation/evaluation of close people, was crucial in the decision of some users to travel and attend the OCT event. According to Shankar et al. (2003), communication between consumers is an important element for the various touchpoints that exist during consumer experiences, referring them to better decisions, since they take into account positive assessments of a meeting on the basis of information that is relevant to themselves, that is, information relevant to the consumer. In this case, the assessments of family and friends serve to collect information, but especially to reassure about the validity of processes and contents (Barwitz and Maas 2016).

#### 4.1.2 Purchase phase

Following the same procedure as in the previous phase, the categorization analysis showed that in this second phase of purchase, during the event itself, *TripAdvisor* users

value four categories of elements: a) interaction with the service; b) atmospheric; c) process; and d) interaction with employees.

- 1) *Elements of interaction with the service*: these elements are fundamental for the users, since they point out the particularities that have a greater influence in their experience along the OCT enclosure - especially at the level of sensorial, emotional, behavioral, relational and cognitive nature, that is, at the level of the strategic modules of experience argued by Schmitt (1999). This category involves all the direct and indirect interactions users have had throughout the service. In this sense, the *attractions, activities and shows* of the event were attributes that users referenced and valued a lot, having a direct impact on the experience. The comments alluded to the quantity, quality and type of activities available; concluding that quality, but mainly, variety of attractions/activities are the main factors that contribute to consumer satisfaction. In this sense, several users indicated an active and positive participation in the different attractions and activities: “*ice skating and sliding on the float is a lot of fun*”; “*We loved the ice bar*”, “*I loved the ice rink and the ice bar*” and “*the puppets’ show was the funniest and most enjoyable*”. It has been proven that if the experience is innovative and different from the usual, consumers will want to participate, test limits and experience new emotions/sensations. The *prices practiced* in most attractions were the most cited element by users, clearly demonstrating that it is one of the most sensitive issues for consumers. In general, users consider that “*there are few activities and very expensive*”. This scenario contributed to the great dissatisfaction of the users, since to entry price adds “*the additional payment in practically all the activities of interest*”, and that coupled with “*the short time that the activities last*” contributes to the consumers to consider that “*it was money badly employed especially for what the event offers*”. In this way, it was verified that the price was a determining factor for the classifications attributed by the consumers, who described the prices as “*exaggerated*”, “*absurd*” and “*very expensive*”.

*Establishments/kiosks/existing street vendors* at the event zone was another attribute that users highlighted in the comments; proving that they have great importance and influence in the experience. In this way, the consumers revealed details and opinions regarding the dining area inside and outside the enclosure, as well as some additional purchases that they made during the event - at the food level, but also at handicraft souvenirs level. In general, the users emphasized the existence of a great diversity of exhibitors full of delicacies and treats, throughout the enclosure of the event, with “*numerous candies to choose with delicious flavors*”. Only eight comments specified some of the purchases made on the enclosure and referred to interesting details: the search for some comfort “*after the cold we caught, the hot chocolate comforted me*”; the search for some memories: “*I loved to remember the “bombocas<sup>6</sup>” of my childhood!*”, and, also, the existence of displeasure: “*I bought Berlin doughnuts that unfortunately were dry*”. But all the comments emphasized the need to try the

<sup>6</sup> Typical sweet and very appreciated in Portugal.

characteristic product of the zone: “*obviously we could not leave without trying the “ginjinha”<sup>7</sup>*”. In this way, it has been proven that the diversity and quality of products available in the various exhibitors, kiosks and street vendors are important elements. Many users commented on the restoration issue by stressing that “*the catering area has little variety*” and “*there is no justification for such high prices given what they had to offer. Opportunity for consumer abuse*”. Most users find the restoration zone “*lowercase with little variety and very expensive for the quality presented*”; valuing, above all, the prices charged, the diversity, quality of meals and the size of the space.

- 2) *Atmospheric elements*: relate to the characteristics and environment that consumers observe throughout the event. The analysis carried out proved that it is a factor of extreme relevance for the users and in general they are very satisfied with the elements (favorable comments represent more than half of the comments made, 62% more concretely). In the various editions, the consumers highlighted the pertinence of the idea and the project, as well as all its implementation in practice; as a “*very well thought out event*,” “*well-designed*” where “*every detail has been thought*” thanks to the “*organizational commitment*”. In addition to assessments about the organization, users highlighted contentment in relation to the results of this effort, mainly in terms of the efforts made in the various structures, environments and decorations. A large part of the consumers consider that the event is “*very cute and funny*”, wrapped in a “*great Christmas spirit*” that “*captures the whole essence of the holiday season, especially for children*”. In this sense, the users highlighted “*the structures and the fantastic scenarios that are transformed completely*” and all the “*efforts in the innovation of the decoration that are not locked up in the typical World of Santa Claus*”. The atmospheric environment refers to tangible and intangible aspects that can significantly alter the consumer experience (Puccinelli et al. 2009). In this sense, environmental stimuli can drastically influence the consumer’s emotional state: a state of pleasure and excitement or impel a rejection and repulsion approach. The negative comments on these issues have emerged in the last three editions of the event, and curiously, the factors that were previously praised were the same that contributed to the discontent of the remaining users. In this sense, they pointed to some of the organization’s negligence of the event, reinforcing the idea that it “*needs to improve*” in some aspects: 1) more and better decoration alluding to Christmas to bridge the “*little Christmas spirit*” felt; 2) better dissemination of the theme of the event throughout the various editions to fill users’ lack of knowledge about the fact that it is a thematic event and not just a Christmas event; 3) improvements in the maintenance and cleaning of the enclosure, with the hiring or reinforcement of more resources in critical areas and hours to “*keep the park more cared*” avoiding “*bad looking*”; 4) rethinking the positioning of the stages in order to improve the visual experience of consumers; and 5) to improve the sound system throughout the enclosure in order to “*contribute to the Christmas spirit*” and to “*inform of the programming of the shows*”. In the 2015/2016 edition, adverse weather conditions

<sup>7</sup> One of the most famous national liquors that also begins to gain international fame. The liquor has a strong flavor intensely fragrant with the bittersweet sour cherries and is usually served in a comestible glass of chocolate.

and the consequent lack of conditions in the zone to maintain the normal running of the event was shared by three users who complained mainly of “*suspension of major attractions without notice*”. These situations prove that the external/dynamic environment had an influence on the user experience (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

- 3) *Service process elements*: according to Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) actions or steps that consumers take to achieve a given outcome play an extremely important role in their perceptions and assessments at the various touchpoints. In this sense, the service processes and the physical configurations of the event area are fundamental process elements for the experience of the consumers. Users mentioned, in particular, aspects of: 1) parking; 2) queues/waiting times at the precinct’s ticket offices, in the existing activities or attractions in the enclosure and sanitary infrastructures; and 3) the lack of signaling and guidance by the organization of the event. In this way, it has been proven that in addition to the decorative/thematic elements referenced previously, the users do not neglect functional elements; being in accordance with the ideas argued by Gentile et al. (2007).

*Parking* is an essential point of contact for the consumer experience in the buying phase (Rosenbaum et al. 2017). The discovery and ease of parking are very important attributes for the convenience of the consumer (Berry et al. 2002; Srivastava and Kaul 2014). Therefore, attributes such as the quantity, price and location of the park (in relation to the entrance of the enclosure) were highlighted as important by users. *Waiting times and ease of movement* around the area were also attributes that users highlighted as important in their experience. For 26 users buying tickets at the local box office turned out to be an intimidating experience due to the huge queues and influx of people to the event. In the 2014/2015 edition, two users who had already purchased the tickets *online* showed their displeasure at the obligatory exchange of tickets at the local box office. This situation contributed to a great dissatisfaction (they considered the event “*terrible*”); questioning the logic and convenience of online shopping if they then have to deal with queues like the consumers who buy them at the moment. Users emphasized the pertinence of a ticket validation system that would optimize ticket flows more safely and quickly. However, this issue of queuing and waiting times was also a very cited element for the various attractions and activities. Overall, users find that “*queues are huge*” and “*wait times are not proportional to the time duration of the activity*”. This situation occurs in all the main activities/attractions, but especially to see Santa Claus, where one of the users confessed: “*We spent some time in line for Santa Claus but we gave up*” and another consumer pointed out that: “*Santa’s house has an endless queue without any kind of entertainment for the little ones who are impatient and are waiting in the cold*”. However, a user’s comment revealed that if the activity is unusual and innovative, consumers do not mind waiting: “*a 2 hour wait for tickets to the ice bar (we didn’t bother)*” and to pay for it (10€ per person for 20 min in the space). However, it should be noted that most users consider the “*entry prices in the event venue very high*”, pointing out that in general “*everything is too expensive*”, “*overpriced*”, that is “*a very commercial event with little affordable values*”. The statements showed that consumers are very attentive and sensitive to this issue of the price and are not satisfied, above all, because to the entry price adds the additional payment of fees in most of the main activities/attractions. Some users also released



comments that showed the lack of signs and orientations by the organization of the event: “soon on arrival is total chaos. There were hundreds of people and nobody saw the organization giving directions, either for those who had no ticket or for those who already had”; but also the need and pertinence of reinforcement of the elements of the organization: “the bad organization of this event soon begins to be noticed with the huge queues to buy the ticket for the event. Only three people to sell hundreds and hundreds of tickets is not to be a good thing”. The last attribute that some users referred to as important were sanitary infrastructures: a comment had a positive nature, indicating conditions “excellent and very clean”. The remainder referred to the number of infrastructures and waiting times, emphasizing them as “insufficient with huge queues” and “neglected”.

- 4) *Elements of interaction with employees*: elements that relate to direct and indirect interactions that consumers have with event employees. Some users have referred to this element as influencing their experience and satisfaction in the event. Comments rested for the service of the street vendors highlighting that “staff that works there as wonderful” or “very kind”. However, one of the users expressed a negative warning about “the lack of sympathy of the people” ironically emphasizing that “what matters is to move on service and people, not the professionalism”. For the credibility of the narrative, creation of the imaginative environment and above all to mark the interaction with the consumers, the organization of the event hires several characters that were not indifferent to the users. This *specialized animation* was one element that received a mostly positive distinction in the comments. For users “the characters were very credible” and “fantastic”, making “the joy of everyone along the grounds of the event”. Users also highlighted the existence of “many animators” and highlighted the fact that they are professionals: “the animators are great, we see that they’re professional actors”. For the majority of consumers, “the characters that are going through the event are very interactive, friendly, fun and lively”, however “Santa Claus is the delight of kids and adults” and “helps in belief for the little ones”. It’s important that the characters adapt to the details and different timings to be able to meet expectations: “We loved Santa and the way he asked my daughter if she had received the little gifts” (note that they attended the event after Christmas Day). In this way, the characters have a prominent role that captures the attention of consumers and contributes to their satisfaction: Santa Claus “was authentic, very sweet” having been “very attentive to every child who sat on his lap. I loved seeing the way everyone treated kids”. In this way, it was concluded that the users considered essential: 1) characterization of the characters; 2) their performance and consequent credibility; 3) the number of characters that exist in the event; 4) the fact that they are allusive to the holiday season; 5) the fact that they are professional actors; but above all consumers point out; 6) the need for great energy, interactivity, animation and sympathy on the part of all the characters so that they can offer the consumers great moments of leisure. The employee-customer interaction is very important at all touchpoints but can be considered critical during the buying phase (Zomerdijk and Voss 2010; Jüttner et al. 2013)

since it will exert a positive or negative influence on consumer assessment of the experience lived (Stein and Ramaseshan 2016). The results indicate a predominantly harmful influence on the users' experience, contributing to negative evaluations about their initial encounter.

#### 4.1.3 Post-purchase phase

In this last phase it was found that the *technological elements* were crucial for consumers. Users especially appreciated the sharing of comments and photos from their experience on online review platforms and on social networks. The comments highlight all the elements set out in the first stages and alert other consumers to the issue of recommendation and repeated participation. In this sense, the technological elements are mainly used when sharing the experience lived (in conversations with family, friends and in the dissemination of comments/publications in social networks) and sharing of recommendations or improvements to the organization of the event. This sharing of information is essential for consumers to be able to pass on their experience to other consumers, as well as to convey information to actors or employees about what they disliked most throughout the experience (in this case consumer dissatisfaction with the prices practiced by the organization of the event was evident). This sharing will shape and deliver a service that meets the unique and specific needs of consumers (Yi and Gong 2013). Regarding the recommendation, more than half of consumers (59%) "recommended" going to the event; revealing that it is "an experience not to be missed", advising "to live the adventure at least once" being "mandatory for those who have children". However, several users warn of the weighted choice of the day in order to "avoid the weekends". The remaining users (41%) "do not recommend", stressing that it is a "total flop" that "is not worth it". Some users recommend the visit to Óbidos or one of the "other events, but not the Christmas Town". These opinions of users have contributed to the ratings of "terrible" or "weak." In relation to the issue of repeated participation, there was a decrease of manifestations by users. Only 37 users spoke on this issue with a significant difference: 65% did not intend to attend the event again (13 reported "we will not be back for sure" and the rest "it does not seem we will be back"). The remaining 35% showed up looking forward to the next edition and said, "coming back next year for sure". Table 2 presents a summary of the elements/resources valued by the three phases of purchase.

## 5 Conclusions and limitations

Consumers currently interact with organizations through several touchpoints, highlighting the growing interest in consumer experience. The consumer journey in an event is increasingly complex and challenging, so there is an obvious need for event organizations to adapt quickly to changes. In this sense, the results of the article allowed highlighting the various elements and attributes that influenced (positively and negatively) the consumer experience along the different points of contact existing through the three phases of purchase of the event. In the pre-purchase phase consumers valued elements: a) functional and motivational; b) communicative; c) of interaction between

**Table 2** Elements/resources valued by users in the three phases purchase

Phase	Element types	Constituent	Characteristics	Most used words by users
Pre-purchase phase	Functional and motivational elements	Exogenous resources	Attributes, location and event service convenience	Christmas
		Endogenous resources	Motives/reasons intrinsic to the consumer	Family
	Communicative elements	Informative messages	Timely and permanent information and clarification	Tickets
		Promotional messages	Better solutions and discounts for consumers	Tour
	Technological elements	Advertising	Illustrative contents of what the event is like	Online
		Ease of use	Simplicity of purchase	Schedule
		Convenience	Speed, relevance and benefits of the purchase	Publicity
		Self-service	Use/development of skills and abilities	Enjoyable
	Elements of interaction between consumers	Consumers comments	Review of experiences on platforms and social networks	Different
		Word of mouth	Comments by multiple consumers	Beautiful
Direct interactions		Recommendations by close actors who had already lived the experience	Fantasy	
			Event	
Purchase phase	Elements of interaction with the service	Quality of service/product	Appearance, dimensions and conditions of available services	Children
		Variety of service/product	Quantity, diversity and innovation of available services	Christmas
	Atmospheric elements	Price of service/product	Monetary value and all the sacrifices of the consumer	Activities
		Service interactions	Direct/indirect interactions that customers cannot control	Shows
	Process Elements	Environment	All the surroundings and atmospheres felt	Prices
		Layout and design	Decorations, scenarios and structures	Animation
		Organization	Facilities for consumers	Enclosure
		Queues and waiting times	Time/effort lost in queues by consumers	Queues
	Elements of interaction with employees	Signs, directions and moving	Instructions and conditions made available	Disappointed
		Service process	Steps that consumers overcome to achieve a result	Decoration
Professionalism		Seriousness, rigour and competence towards consumers	Organization	
			Small	
			Enjoyable	
			Experience	

Table 2 (continued)

Phase	Element types	Constituent	Characteristics	Most used words by users
Post-purchase	Technological elements	Personalized service Kindness Comments about experience	Satisfaction of consumer needs and expectations Delicacy and affability with consumers Sharing experience on platforms and social networks	Parking Magical Christmas Recommend Photos Disappointed Experience

consumers, and d) technological. In the purchase phase they valued elements: a) of interaction with the service; b) of interaction with employees; c) atmospheric and d) elements of process; while in the post-purchase they value technological elements and of interaction between consumers (Table 2).

In the pre-purchase phase consumers are increasingly concerned about obtaining up-to-date information, advantageous solutions and apply their skills/abilities when buying tickets online, as long as it is possible. Thus, the technological elements, communicative elements and the elements of interaction between consumers are critical to consumers, and the touchpoints refer mainly to the media and friends/family through which they got knowledge about the event. The purchase phase is characterized by the active participation of consumers in the activities/attractions of the event. As such, the elements of the process, elements of interaction with the service, and of interaction with employees are highlighted. The extroverted, communicative and sociable nature of the consumer contributes to these elements. Atmospheric elements also play an essential role as they help in the credibility of event history and consumer imagination; proving that consumers do not neglect hedonic elements or functional elements. The respective touchpoints are located along the event enclosure, positioning themselves in strategic locations. In the post-purchase phase, consumers do not neglect technological elements for the dissemination of their experience in the event, giving great emphasis on the sharing of photographs and comments. However, there are also many consumers who prefer face-to-face communicative elements among their friends, family and acquaintances, i.e. elements of interaction between consumers.

These categories combined with the features highlighted by the users provide a comprehensive understanding of the elements valued by consumers, helping the events organizations in identifying these elements and respective touchpoints along the experience of its consumers. Event organizations should make efforts to present and make available these elements, as their absence contributes to consumer dissatisfaction and has clear consequences for the overall experience of consumers in the event. In this way, event organizations must incorporate and invest in current information technologies, effective logistics operations and increasingly efficient and personalized services. Human and marketing resources cannot be neglected either and if they feel they need to, they must ally themselves with external partners that allow the creation and delivery of positive and full experiences for the consumers. This scenario demonstrates the inherent complexity of creating, managing and controlling the experience of consumers, but also their unquestionable importance for the long-term success of event organizations, being necessary to associate it with one of the main concerns of companies.

The article contributes with new considerations for the consumer experience in identifying the elements and resources valued by the three stages of purchase on events. However, it's necessary to interpret the results taking into account the limitations of the research, i.e. the fact that it is a thematic event for families, with the children being the main target audience, the fact that the information has a source restricted to online communities, the lack of complements of information and characteristics of informants, which makes it difficult to generalize the results and the need for a great interpretive ability of the researcher, i.e. the content analysis was a task complex and potentially imprecise due to the cross-cutting of thematic. This article highlights as future research lines: a) measuring consumer experience across touchpoints and buying

phases; b) whether different measures will be needed in the course of the consumer's experience; c) determine the effects of various touchpoints in the customer experience; and d) to ascertain whether the consumer experience differs in other sectors and contexts and if it has implications for its measurement.

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