



Consumption of experiences in boutique hotels in the context of e-WOM

Consumo de experiências em hotéis boutique no contexto do e-WOM

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Abstract

The postmodern society is characterized by consumers' hedonistic behavior and values consumption of experiences as a form of differentiation and social elevation. This study aims to understand consumers' online manifestations of experiences related to boutique hotels and motivations for engaging in electronic word-of-mouth. It is related to studies on experiential consumption and understanding of postmodern individuals. It adopts netnography as a basis for collecting data and analyzing post-consumption behavior in boutique hotels. This study conducted participant observation of online manifestations of boutique hotels' consumers. Moreover, computer-mediated speech analysis, image analysis of virtually extracted data, and discourse analysis of interviews with users identified from previous interactions and online postings were conducted. This research presents a different perspective from Pine and Gilmore's approach by utilizing the experience economy, postmodern consumer analysis, and boutique hotel concepts. It was observed that exclusivity and privacy are central elements determining consumers' choice and definition of boutique hotels. However, online manifestations result in exhibitionist and paradoxical behavior.

Keywords: Consumption experience, boutique hotels, electronic word of mouth, netnography.

Resumo

A sociedade pós-moderna é caracterizada pelo comportamento hedonista dos consumidores e valoriza o consumo de experiências como uma forma de diferenciação e elevação social. O presente estudo tem como objetivo entender as manifestações on-line de experiências de consumidores relacionadas à hotéis boutique e as motivações para o uso do boca a boca eletrônico (e-WOM). A pesquisa está relacionada à estudos sobre experiência de consumo e compreensão do sujeito pós-moderno, adota a netnografia como base para coleta de dados e análise do comportamento pós-consumo em hotéis boutique. O estudo foi conduzido por meio da observação participante de manifestações online de consumidores de hotéis boutique. Além disso, foram realizadas análises do discurso mediado por computador, análise de imagens de dados e análise de discurso extraído de entrevistas com usuários identificados a partir de interações evidentes e publicações on-line. Esta pesquisa apresenta uma nova perspectiva a partir da abordagem de Pine e Gilmore, utilizando a economia da experiência, a análise pós-moderna do consumidor e os conceitos de hotéis boutique como abordagem. Observou-se que exclusividade e privacidade são elementos centrais que determinam a escolha e a definição de hotéis boutique pelos consumidores, contudo as manifestações online resultam em comportamento exibicionista e paradoxal.

Palavras-chave: Consumo de experiências, hotéis boutique, e-WOM, netnografia.

1. Introduction

Word-of-mouth is a legitimate form of personal dissemination of consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the consumption of a good or service. Owing to the emergence of online consumption behavior, word-of-mouth marketing is now conducted online (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). However, in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), aspects such as communication of self-image to other consumers, self-satisfaction, and social projection when disseminating opinions have gained popularity and become relevant factors influencing consumer behavior. Thus, non-altruistic factors, which do not reflect consumers' contribution to the company or other consumers, implicitly emerge as priority interests in online evaluations and comments. Such online behavior's hedonistic aspects highlight the importance of further study in this field. Furthermore, this study analyzes tourist experiences in boutique hotels, as manifested in online communities.

Bourdieu (2007) considers consumption to be associated with a society's culture and values. Regarding values, individuals join certain groups by consuming certain goods or services and start sharing values common to that group, raising their degree of belongingness. Thus, consumption is related to the hedonistic aspect, characterized as a means of seeking the happiness and

success. According to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), although the hedonistic approach does not provide a complete answer, it can help one understand the various facets of consumer experience and the postmodern kaleidoscopic consumer.

According to Binkhorst and Dekker (2009), Pine and Gilmore (2016), Vergopoulos (2016), and Chang (2018), the tourism field provides considerable scope for generating experiences and is thus chosen for conducting research on experiential consumption. This study assumes that the research approach for understanding consumption of experience is related to a set of postulated concepts on experiential marketing and consumption experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Holbrook, 2018; Holbrook & Hirschmann, 1982; Schmitt, 1999), economics of experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999, 2014, 2016), and experience as a concept of value (Chaney, Lunardo, & Mencarelli, 2018; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a). The experience approach is validated and reinforced by several theoreticians (e.g., Dubé, Le Bel, & Sears, 2003; Lusch, Vargo, & O'Brien (2007); Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004b). Recent studies (e.g., Cova, Caru, & Cayla, 2018; Holbrook, 2018) also strengthen and update this approach. This study uses Pine and Gilmore's (1998, 1999, 2014, 2016) proposal as a central approach, because of these authors' previous contributions regarding tourist experience and their



belief that an experience should be surprising, extraordinary, non-routine, unforgettable, and unique.

2. Literature review

2.1 eWOM

This study considers individuals' online interaction as this study's starting point. Online, consumers act as protagonists, reporting their opinions and impressions to other consumers. This is also known as eWOM. eWOM is characterized by Internet users' online comments about various services or products, including travel destinations, hotels, and tourist services. These comments serve as important sources of information for other travelers (Kolb, 2017). Word-of-mouth is the basic mode of communication among consumers and involves verbal exchange of positive or negative perceptions about a good or service.

Similarly, according to Gretzel and Yoo (2008), eWOM comprises online guest reviews and is a source of information for travel planning. These studies highlight that eWOM mainly comprises feedback from previous clients on social travel websites.

As word-of-mouth comprises recommendations or caveats from friends/family on goods or services, it enhances consumers' awareness of the positive and negative aspects of services offered by certain organizations. With technological advancements, online platforms are now used widely to spread word-of-mouth on various areas of tourism and hospitality. According to Kolb (2017), an increase in online publications and reviews affects not only the channels but also how tourist experiences are promoted and consumed.

In the hospitality arena, the growing number of social media platforms allows hotel guests to share opinions about their travel experience with other customers and communicate with the management. These platforms include TripAdvisor, Facebook, Instagram, and Booking.com, and they help potential clients in their decision-making process and contribute toward a company's strategic management (Kolb, 2017). Thus, eWOM plays an increasingly important role in the hospitality industry. Similarly, Gretzel and Yoo (2008) find that most clients post comments on travel review sites and express confidence in the comments and reflections posted by other customers who have experienced the services. The survey results showed that the decision-making process (to make a reservation) of 84% of potential hotel guests is influenced by online comments from other travelers.

Through a literature review and empirical study, Henning-Thurau and Walsh (2003) identify eight factors motivating WOM engagement and online consumer interaction: concern for other consumers, desire to help the company, social benefit, self-efficacy, economic reward, expression of positive emotions, seeking of counseling, and venting of negative feelings. They find that social benefits, self-efficacy, and economic reward are frequently cited factors, and "self-interest" is the main reason for online interaction. They recommend conducting new studies

using consumer profiles other than those of German consumers, conducting specific studies in the service area, and applying this research to other contexts.

Regarding eWOM marketing in the luxury hospitality sector and users' motivations to engage in online posting, Zheng, Hyewon, and Kincaid (2009) point out that 55% of the surveyed consumers refer to other users' comments for decision making. They understand that consumers are more inclined to post negative experiences on the Internet. Additionally, there is evidence that general comments tend to be fake or posted by false users.

Significant challenges emerge in the context of developing and understanding new research methods. With the advancement of eWOM technology, consumers seek to explore new social formations that develop when people communicate and organize via e-mail, websites, mobile devices, and other communication modes, which are increasingly mediated. These mediated interactions are key to identifying new social practices, and they have become a topic of interest for studies in the applied social sciences field (Hine, 2005). To understand the hedonistic social interactions mediated by digital platforms, this research adopts a qualitative netnographic methodology.

2.2 Hedonist consideration: the pleasure is all mine

The remarkable hedonistic character of postmodernism emphasizes the consumption of well-being, search for pleasure, body worship, and importance of image and aesthetic appeal. The word "hedonism" comes from the Greek word "*edonê*," which refers to pleasure as a way of life; that is, pleasure as the path to happiness. Rocha (2005) observes that hedonistic discourse is the best-known ideology on consumption and affirms that it characterizes consumption as a means to achieve success and happiness.

According to Lipovetsky (2005, p. 7), hedonism is "defined by the desire to feel 'more', glide, vibrate with life, have immediate sensations, and be placed in an integral movement and in a kind of sensorial journey that gives meaning to life". The term hedonic consumption initially appeared in the work of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), and other authors focus on the hedonistic approach. Other studies suggest the transformation of this term, and some highlight new developments in the hedonic aspect of consumption. Schmitt (1999) and Rocha (2005, p. 128) propose that the "hedonistic view establishes itself as the mainstream ideology of consumption." For Bauman (2013), Harvey (2001), and Lipovetsky (2005, 2007), in the hedonistic view, the dimension of experience gains importance, and the consumption activity is attributed to emotional or aesthetic experiences provided by the object of consumption.

Thus, consumption is a form of gratification and gaining of experiences from the hedonic viewpoint. Therefore, the origin of hedonism or hedonic consumption is attributed to the elevation of individualism, with an emphasis on self-presentation in social communities and on consequent creation of systems that intensify personalization.



2.3 Individualism: the search for self

An individual-consumer pursues happiness based on his/her own well-being and pleasure (Lipovetsky, 2005). Individualization and the elaboration of how life is conducted are drawn from this perspective, leading to an increasing number of people searching for the unprecedented freedom to experience (Bauman, 2001). Per Bauman (2013), consumers develop individualized identities and enjoy manifesting their freedom. In the modern era, brand or product loyalty stood out as consumption behavior, while in the postmodern era, experimentation has liberated the consumer—today, the consumer is obsessed with appearance, pleasure, and well-being. Another consequence of the proliferation of individualism and virtualization in the postmodern era is taking pictures of self and exploring the self-image, which Lipovetsky (2005) points out as an extension of narcissism and the search for recognition, approval, and sense of meaning.

This era allows autonomous individuals capable of personifying attitudes to produce and demonstrate their own existence. The postmodern individual has become detached, without lasting social ties. The fragmentation of society and, consequently, of consumption typify individualism, which operates through a virtual consumer profile.

As per Cova and Cova (2002) and Pathak and Pathak-Shelat (2017) a group interacts by sharing cognitive experiences; these experiences are based on self-perception and emotions emerging from the feeling of belongingness to the group. This is the paradoxical aspect of the postmodern individual, as defended by Skandalis, Byrom, and Banister (2016). On the one hand, tribalism and collective practices are evidenced, and, on the other, individualism and hedonism are hallmarks of this dialectical and paradoxical individual's behavior.

As Kozinets (1999) argues, people want to “be together,” gather in tribes, and be in communities; this aspect provides evidence of the success of digital media, which promotes tribal practices in the cyberspace. Social media and online life merge with offline life, and there is no longer a difference between the real and virtual worlds. Virtual pleasures overlap with the mundane, and there is no disconnect between them in time and space (Baudrillard, 1991; Harvey, 2001).

The valorization of the image, aesthetic connotation, and need to belong to a group are associated with the individualization and valorization of the self-image, which are designated as

narcissism. These are associated with the reflection of social aestheticization and individualism. According to Lipovetsky (2005) and Lipovetsky and Serroy (2015), overvaluation of the self has led to narcissism, which is a central issue in contemporary consumer behavior and indicates exacerbation of individualism and human vanity. Narcissism is the effect of a cross between hedonistic and individualistic social logics, driven by the universe of objects and signs (Lipovetsky, 2005).

According to Lipovetsky (2005), audience recognition and the need for a sense of approval permeate postmodern narcissistic behavior. The private sphere itself changes its meaning once it has surrendered to individuals' diverse desires and the search for oneself. Narcissism is also represented by individuals' obsolescence, less devotion to the other, and a desire to achieve instant celebrity status and be admired through media resources. Continuing this point of view, narcissistic individuals need space to exhibit themselves and create channels with spectators, thereby turning the social environment into a showcase for spectators who are eager to spy on them and desire their life.

According to Cova and Cova (2002), because of this individualistic and solitary context of postmodern consumers, new goods and services have started to appear; these products are referenced in the individuality of such consumers and customized to the point of being practically singular and exclusive. Goods or services help such individuals project their image to the tribes to which they belong. Additionally, the value of products or services' is not derived from their function but the set of meanings transmitted and used for the users' image formation (Cova & Cova, 2002).

This is no longer a matter of selling products and services - it is necessary to offer live experiences. Unexpected and extraordinary things are capable of producing emotions, bonds, affection, and sensations. According to Lipovetsky (2007) and Simmons (2008), the object's civilization has been replaced by an “economy of experience”, leisure, spectacle, play, tourism, and distraction. In this context, compared with the desire for possessing things, a hyper consumer seeks the multiplication of experiences, pleasure of experience through experience, and an overload of feelings and new emotions (Lipovetsky, 2009, p. 63).

Several researchers use the concept of experience in the areas of marketing and tourism; however, their understanding corresponds to a multitude of definitions and meanings, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - Definition of experience

Author	Definition of experience
Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999, 2014, 2016); Pine (2015)	They use the term “economy of experience” to define a distinct economic supply that is different from services, just as services are different from goods. Successful experiences are those that customers consider simultaneously unique, memorable, and sustainable, and would like repeat and promote through word-of-mouth.
Vergopoulos (2016)	This author understands that an experience is a process of learning the world and is a live moment focused on pleasure and hedonism.



Author	Definition of experience
Prebensen, Nina, Chen, and Uysal (2014)	They renew the approach of tourist experience from the perspective of the co-creation process. Consumers create their own experience.
Filep and Pearce (2013)	They focus on experiences wherein live moments are converted into pleasure and hedonism.
Panchal (2013); Sharpley and Stone (2012)	They focus on the search for happiness and well-being from an experience perspective.
Lashley (2008)	This study discusses tourism experiences with the view of creating hospitable relationships between the hosts and guests; these experiences involve emotions, which are essential for creating a memory.
Titz (2007)	This study argues that no single model of experiential consumption has emerged until now. It shows that experiential consumption is central to a comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in the context of hospitality and tourism.
Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung (2007)	From the consumers' point of view, experiences are pleasant, engaging, and memorable encounters for those who consume these events.
Uriely (2005)	Tourist experience is currently described as a complex and diverse phenomenon, which is mostly constituted through individual consumer analysis.
Carù and Cova (2003)	Experience occurs when a phenomenon is translated into knowledge.
Ryan (2002)	Experiences interrupt people in their everyday lives and generate expectations to provide something of interest that requires consumer attention; experiences are incredibly engaging.
Mossberg (2003)	Many elements are blended to engage the consumer emotionally, physically, intellectually, and spiritually.
McLellan (2000)	The purpose of experience design is to orchestrate functional, intentional, engaging, and memorable experiences.
Schmitt (1999)	Experiences are private events that are not self-generated but occur in response to a staged situation, and they involve the whole being.
Gupta and Vajic (1999)	An experience occurs when a customer has some sensation or knowledge acquisition; it also occurs through some level of interaction with different elements of a context created by a service provider.
O'Sullivan and Spangler (1998)	An experience involves an individual's participation and involvement in the consumption and the state of being physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, or spiritually engaged with experience.
Arnould and Price (1993)	Extraordinary experiences are characterized by high-levels of emotional intensity.
Mannell and Iso-Ahola (1987)	An experience or state of mind is uniquely individual and deserves attention in terms of quality and not the amount of leisure.
Holbrook and Hirschmann (1982)	Experiences are facets of consumer behavior that are related to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotional aspects of product contact.

Source: Adapted from Walls, Okumus, Wang, and Kwum (2011).

Other research on consumption of experiences has also gained popularity. Van Boven and Gilovich (2003); Gilovich Kumar, and Jampol (2015); and Ahuvia (2017) argue that consuming experiences is more pleasurable and makes people happier than consuming material goods. Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) also find that consumed experiences are remembered more frequently than the consumption of material goods. The experience marketing view considers consumers as emotional individuals in pursuit of non-trivial experiences that create feelings of pleasure and well-being.

As per Pine and Gilmore (2014) and Pine (2015), in little more than a decade of thinking about consumption of experiences, this topic has strongly influenced the development of new business models in a wide variety of companies. These authors conceptualize five main approaches that companies are adopting after structuring the initial studies on individuals: (a) experiential marketing, which applies experiences associated with the marketing of goods and services; (b) digital experiences, using the Internet, digital platforms, and other electronic media, to create new user-experience interfaces; (c) customer experience management, which involves conducting experience tests on operations to improve service interactions with customers; (d) experiences as economic offers rather than value propositions; and (e) business modeling with experiences

that produce transformations. Thus, use of experience as a distinct value offer is the central proposal of Pine and Gilmore's (1999) approach, and it is influenced by the factors of space, time, involvement, and personal meaning for the consumer. The value of this relationship lies in not only capturing or retaining clients but also generating special and individual meaning as well as the ability to perpetuate it in its consumers' memories. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999, 2014, 2016), experience can be perceived or constructed along four dimensions: entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism. Differentiation among the four dimensions varies according to the consumers' level of involvement and participation. The dimensions of experience provide guidance for research categorization associated with the perception of boutique hotel experience in online reviews.

Cova et al. (2018) also analyze the concept of escapism or escape in the context of experiences; this concept plays a relevant role in developing an understanding of the adoption of *second lives* (secondary lives) by individuals. These experiences are driven by the need to escape from ordinary life. In the case of consumption of experience, a series of memorable events are acquired that affect consumers in particular ways; that is, the acquisition of goods or services is replaced by that of sensations, memories, or cultural inheritance. Therefore, one



motivation to consume experience is precisely the ability to enjoy memorable moments (Pine & Gilmore, 2016) so they can be shared. Thus, consumption of experiences has a direct relationship with hedonistic motivations and eWOM, whose purpose is to “collect stories” so they can be recounted and disseminated to make one appear as a special person and a differentiated holder of an unequalled life. That is, consumption of experiences is also considered as an individual’s attribute to differentiate oneself from others.

Mossberg (2003, p. 27), in a study of restaurant services, determines that a (positive) experience should include the following characteristics: (a) an active, dynamic process; (b) a strong social dimension accompanying this process; (c) the integration of components of meaning and a sense of pleasure; (d) involvement driven by absorption and personal control; (e) a process that is context-dependent and entails uncertainty associated with something new; and (f) an experience intertwined with the individual’s life.

3. Method

This study used the epistemological stance of postmodernism to understand the consumer and generate a basis for theoretical positioning. The methodological and phenomenological positioning opts for a set of netnographic techniques for research and data collection, as explained in the next section. This approach involves online participant observation. Regarding the data analysis technique, a computer-based discourse analysis was initially adopted, primarily for data organization and analysis of online reviews. Next, evaluation and analysis of photographs posted by users on online platforms and discourse related to interviews with users were conducted according to the proposal of Orlandi (2015).

This research approach was chosen primarily because qualitative research stimulates consumers to reveal their behaviors and thoughts in detail; additionally, qualitative research detects the emotional manifestation of consumers’ preferences. Hence, by addressing the diverse aspects of consumer behavior, we sought epistemological, theoretical, and methodological consistency to meet the requirements of the scientific method.

Owing to gaps in several studies, consumer preferences of the TripAdvisor community were also considered. Hence, this study considered the work of Zheng et al. (2009), who recommend a qualitative analysis of users’ motivation identified through their comments on the TripAdvisor platform, with their application to different segments and cities. Rageh, Malewar, and Woodside (2013) also conduct a netnographic study on the TripAdvisor platform and recommend the continuous deepening of netnographic studies on tourist experiences with the platform by examining locations and modalities other than resort hotels in Egypt. Additionally, Zhang, Wang, and Chen (2017) use TripAdvisor to evaluate restaurant reviews and present a decision-making model related to criteria interdependencies in tourists’ decision-making process. These

studies not only determine the use of TripAdvisor as a research tool but also help identify new gaps regarding consumers’ motivations through online manifestations.

3.1 Boutique hotels

The choice of boutique hotels is in line with the suggestion of McIntosh and Siggs (2005), who study emotions and perceptions of experiences in boutique hotels in New Zealand. They identify dimensions of differentiation among these hotels in relation to others. They observe that exclusivity and an emphasis on privacy are the key aspects motivating clients to search for this type of enterprises. They suggest researching whether perceptions are similar in other countries’ boutique hotels; hence, this study analyzed Brazilian boutique hotels.

Angeli, Torres, and Maranhão (2012) identify a growing appreciation for independent and regional enterprises seeking to offer values, culture, differentiated service, design, exclusivity, and customized services in an attempt to create a unique concept. The quest for hotel services’ systematic standardization ironically initiated a movement leading to the growth of a format labeled as “boutique hotel.” This movement was inspired by consumers’ search for hotels with unique characteristics, customized services, cultural and regional specificities, and ability to generate experiences.

There is no consensus on the characteristics defining a boutique hotel. Aggett (2007); Rogerson (2010); David, Jonas, and Day (2013); Sorensen and Jensen (2015); and Chang (2018) indicate that the perception of experience in boutique hotels is a key factor that emerges in consumption studies on tourism experience. Studies on boutique hotels have already been conducted in the UK (Aggett, 2007), New Zealand (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005), and South Africa (Rogerson, 2010).

According to Aggett (2007) and Sorensen and Jensen (2015), the guests define the main aspects of boutique hotels by their location, quality, privacy, services provided, and personalized services offered. Therefore, the meaning of a boutique hotel goes beyond the provision of hosting services and is associated with customization, quality, and unique experience.

It is a trend in the hotel industry to search for establishments with unique characteristics and identity where guests can avail personalized services. This is an intangible differential that is almost impossible to be copied by competitors and sustains the hotel enterprise for the long-term (Angeli et al., 2012). Harvey (2001) points out that the tourism industry creates an illusory world, where space becomes the setting for the “show,” which is intentionally beautiful, clean, and attractive. Everyday experiences are increasingly aesthetic, and consumption is increasingly dependent on the image design of an object. To attract customers to this built-up image, these hotel ventures, which do not have the same marketing strength or networks as major hotel brands, must become visible, known, and recognized by consumers. Owing to the proliferation of virtualization, wherein online media platforms play a crucial



role in propagating current tourism offers, one can observe the exacerbated individualism and “empowerment” of consumers when they express their self and opinions about everything in all places. The growing turmoil is evident in individuals due to their need to find people sharing the same meaning and to seek belongingness to a group in which they can express their opinions have made eWOM marketing - mediated by virtual assessment environments, tourism services, and experiences - gain more and more notoriety and relevance.

3.2 Netnography: participant observation in an online context

Kozinets (1997, 1999, 2002, 2014, 2018) introduced the concept of netnography - focusing on one very specific area, consumer research - to cover the phenomena transpiring in the online environment. This study proposal does not generalize its findings beyond this context. However, Lipovetsky (2017) argues that the “real” and “virtual” worlds are not mutually exclusive; they are one and are interdependent. This author recognizes that phenomena occurring in online communities, newsgroups, chat rooms, email lists, personal homepages, and other formats for sharing ideas can build communities, and consumers are considered as objective sources of information. Other researchers (e.g., Hine, 2005; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Medberg & Heinonen, 2014; Noveli, 2010) also use this methodology along with various social network databases.

According to Kozinets (2014), netnography is an independent method that allows the identification of consumption behaviors and motivations related to online communities. It helps understand the discourse and interactions of those involved in

computer-mediated communication on the issues at hand. Kozinets (2002) also argues that netnography seeks to understand consumer experience, since individuals usually write comments after consumption or, in the case of this study, describe their hotel experiences after their stay. Medberg and Heinonem (2018) reveal a rapid growth in the use of netnography for marketing research since 2008, meaning that netnography has become established as a recognized qualitative methodology in marketing studies.

According to Hine (2005), although netnography is derived from ethnography, which historically originated from anthropology, when observing social and physical groups in communities, the digital environment requires an adaptation of these techniques and understanding to ensure that netnography can be used as a method or a set of techniques.

Concerning the description of the steps in netnographic research, in the digital context, it is necessary to present the procedures in detail to clarify the methodological procedures adopted in this study. For data collection, the participant observation (experimenter-participant) technique was used in virtual communities. Using the TripAdvisor platform, beginning with the step of registration in the online community, this study involved follow-up of the group’s activities, weekly participation and interaction with the group, analysis of their comments, creation of communities to discuss the topic, conducting of online discussion groups in the forums, analysis of images, and interviews with users. These details are presented in Tables 2a, 2b, and 3.

Table 2a - Summary of research design and data analysis according to Kozinets’s (1997, 2002, 2018) method

Stages of Methodological Procedures			
Phase	Procedure	Criteria and Comments	Reference
Step 1: Filtering	Selection of hotels	Use definitions of the four best boutique hotels in Brazil, according to TripAdvisor and the Exclusive Collection Hotels Certification (2016). Selected hotels: - Ponta dos Ganchos - Hotel Botanique - Hotel Saint Andrews - Hotel Unique Garden	Kozinets (1997) recommends the use of various types of filters to extract only the information of relevance to the research, because of the large amount of data available for collection.
Step 2: Comments on TripAdvisor	Selection of reviews on each sampled hotel on the TripAdvisor platform	Select comments with photos aimed at legitimizing the user. A total of 107 valid comments were submitted on the selected hotels.	It is important certify the legitimacy of the users’ participation. On the Internet, especially in virtual communities, fake profiles and non-legitimate information can be used. The researcher can look for ways to guarantee the users’ validity. It is also worth paying attention to the researcher’s evaluation focus on users’ online behavior (Kozinets, 1997, 1999).
Step 3: Analysis of the computer-mediated discourse	Analysis of comments and identification of group-relevant words	Conduct a computer-mediated discourse analysis by categorizing text into themes. Conduct a thematic analysis through thematic interpretation and conceptual grouping.	As per Kozinets (2002), this step refers to the information the researcher observed in the speeches, communications, and symbolic interactions of community members as well as researchers’ own participation.
Step 4: Analysis interpretation	Analysis of emotions, feelings, and perceptions inserted in the comments	Analyze the comments in light of the theoretical dimensions.	
Step 5: Image analysis	Analysis of images posted on TripAdvisor	Extract comments as photos to verify the legitimacy of reviews. Here, 457 images were selected through categorization and interpretation of images based on theoretical dimensions.	Kozinets (2014, p. 266) recommends paying attention to the types of social data that are available (textual, visual, audiovisual, graphic, etc.) and being prepared to collect and organize them.



Stages of Methodological Procedures			
Phase	Procedure	Criteria and Comments	Reference
Step 6: User selection	Selection of users with high-level of platform interaction	The TripAdvisor platform itself identifies each user's level of interaction with the virtual community.	According to the scale of the platform and Kozinets's (2014) interaction criteria, only users with the highest levels of interaction are selected.
Step 7:	Identification of participants in other personal exposure social media through images	Identify users on social media such as Instagram to validate the active subjects in eWOM social interactions.	Kozinets (1997) recommends verifying users' legitimacy and identifying other types of communities in which they participate.
Step 8:	Follow-up of users' manifestations on social media such as Instagram, and annotation and identification of travel posts	Conduct follow-up of the interactions, text posts, and weekly images of the 11 selected users. Verify the users as active or "compromised" according to Kozinets' (1997) proposal.	Participants should be rated according to Kozinets (1997).
Step 9:	Interviews	Interview the 11 users to correlate the evidence from the image analysis and deepen the collected data. After identifying the users on social media, contact users privately and send a request for the research presentation and interview scheduling. The researcher should adopt a guiding script.	As per Kozinets (2002), in this step, the data are collected through interviews with the individuals, message exchanges, email conversations, or other interaction tools. Users are mapped according to the type of interaction level on the platform (Kozinets, 1997), and only those profiles registered as "open," that is, with publicly available data without policy restrictions, are considered to ensure privacy.
Step 10: Discourse analysis	Analysis of interview speech	Analyze the content of users' interviews. Interpret the data in light of the theory. Create associations of the interpretations.	

Source: Authors (2018).

Table 2b - Research design

Research Design and Data Collect	
Method	Netnography
Data collect	Travel reviews; Interviews; Images.
data source	Travelers' comments and pictures from TripAdvisor; Images from Instagram
Data analysis	Computer Mediated Speech Analysis (ADMC); (reviews from Tripadvisor) Image Analysis; (images from Tripadvisor and Instagram) - Discourse Analysis (interviews with selected users)

Source: Authors (2017).

Table 3 - Data source

Comments Posted on Tripadvisor (2015 To 2017)			
Hotels	Total	Portuguese	With photo
Hotel Ponta dos Ganchos	469	283	35
Hotel Saint Andrews	164	151	18
Hotel Botanique	153	134	30
Hotel Unique Garden	124	115	25
Total	910	683	108

Source: Authors (2017).

Regarding data analysis, the comments were first coded by related themes. Then, they were coded into folders for better analysis of the extracted data. First, we analyzed which aspects of the dimensions of consumption experience are present in the 109 comments and whether other possible evidence emerging from the field related to Pine and Gilmore's (1999) proposal was present with respect to the dimensions of the experiences.

After grouping the themes, reflection and visualization of other words related to this field were conducted to obtain further evidence. Following the computer-mediated speech analysis,

images posted by users on TripAdvisor and Instagram were analyzed based on the image collection and analysis techniques defined after the research-operationalization process and the definition of research conjectures.

3.3 Analysis of results from the platform's perspective: motivations and confirmation of theory on experiential consumption

Based on data collection using netnographic techniques and comments on the TripAdvisor and Instagram platforms, it was possible to observe that consumers seek simulation or a



simulacrum environment (Baudrillard, 1991) to legitimize their consumption and strengthen the projection of a simulated identity. This study considers interactions in virtual environments, whose users seek to create an identity of a “traveler,” “opinion maker”, “reference point” or “influencer.” The symbolic resources inherent in social media allow individuals to construct fragmented identity narratives and legitimize their consumption practices through online exposure.

Initially, we sought to understand whether the motivations of online interactions correspond to the theoretical precepts. Based on the analysis of reviews on TripAdvisor, following the

typology of Henning-Thurau and Walsh (2003), we observed that the motivation for online postings is mainly obtaining social benefits. The motivations reflect the desire to belong to a group or community. Additionally, self-elevation is characterized by the consumer’s desire to receive recognition from other consumers and feel good about the elevation of own image before others. The results also present evidence on the motivation of expression of emotions, including the desire to vent frustrations, minimize anxiety about a negative experience, or sharejoy and experiences of consumption. Details on the motivation of online posting are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 - Motivations of online posting based on Henning-Thurau and Walsh (2003): motivation for electronic word-of-mouth

Online Motivation: eWOM	Number of Reviews
Personal benefit	40
Auto elevation	100
Expression of emotion	98
Financial reward	0
Altruism	0
Support in solving problems	0

Source: Authors (2018).

The motivational criteria are listed in Table 4. In sum, in contrast with Henning-Thurau and Walsh (2003), motivations related to altruism and support for solving problems are not evidenced in the selected comments. It was concluded that motivations for online manifestations are associated with characteristics of consumers who are concerned with self and personal projection of self-efficacy during interactions on eWOM media.

Returning to the research objectives, the next step involves providing evidence of the dimensions of the experience reflected through the online comments and analyzing them in light of the theory of the economy of experience. This study analyzed the following dimensions of experience: escapism,

aesthetics, education, and entertainment, in accordance with the contributions of consumer studies.

Concerning the dimensions of experience, it was evidenced that the selected hotels meet the criteria of being experiential ventures or experience generators. They also present evidence of the aesthetics, education, escapism, and entertainment dimensions, in accordance with the approach of Pine and Gilmore (1999, 2014, 2016). Hence, the results validate the hypothesis that the consumption of experiences is associated with individual perceptions as well as with sensorial elements legitimized by a group through the exposition of online comments. The reviews associated with each dimension of experience are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 - Evidence - Dimensions of experience according to Pine and Gilmore (1999, 2014)

Experience Economy Dimensions	Related Evidence	Example Of Comments - Tripadvisor
Aesthetics: Emphasis on image and visual context of experience	Beauty	“[...] very nicely decorated chalets.” “The rooms are very charming and warm.”
	Landscape	“The hotel impresses right from the entrance! Excellence is reflected through the gardens, the classic structure, and the service.”
	Decoration	“It is a beautiful place.” “It is situated in a scenic location and provides six-star service and impeccable cuisine.”
Escapism: Emphasis on escape from everyday life; evidence of the extraordinary	Spa Relaxation	“[...] The sensory and relaxing experiences from the aromas and textures of the SPA enrich the lodging.”
	Pleasure	“[...] an experience in comfort and wellness.” “This exclusive hotel has wonderful decoration; we felt like we were in an English castle.”
	Welfare	“We had an extremely pleasant experience.” “The hotel returns every penny of your investment in the form of well-being and comfort.” “If you like peace and rest, this is your gold standard.”
Entertainment: Emphasis on fun and leisure generated by the consumer experience	Leisure activities	“[...] It also features an exceptional environment with various models of activities and an international standard SPA as an extra package.”
	Distraction	“We were spoiled on the beach practicing kayak. We had a wonderful experience” “The hotel offers stand up paddle in Canadian canoes for guests.”
Education: Emphasis on the learning process and knowledge generated from the experience	Learning activities, cultural emphasis, and enhancement of knowledge	“Another point that caught my attention is the paintings and art [...]” “The next day, we were given a cooking class by the hotel chef. This experience was par excellence. The class began in the hotel’s organic garden [...]”

Source: Authors (2018).



According to the reviews, the dimensions of escapism and aesthetics were the most relevant in the context of customer perception, mainly due to the environment, landscape, decoration, relaxation, and well-being. The entertainment dimension, which is subtly reported by users as something interesting in boutique ventures, is illustrated by comments associated with leisure activities and is characterized as a less-relevant dimension for consumers with boutique hotel experiences. However, the educational dimension was extremely well-observed; entrepreneurs considered it a complementary dimension in the offer of experiences in boutique hotels.

In comments on the “education” dimension (Table 5), one user valued works of art. This consumption requires individuals’ prior knowledge and immersion within the experience’s cultural context. This indicates the guests’ low perception of the boutique hotel on the educational dimension. Consumers’ perception of this dimension is based on their previous repertoire of experiences. Additionally, the consumer must be willing to learn and be transformed. An example of this is reflected through the comment of the guests who took a cooking course in the hotel during their stay or who admired the works of art. The educational dimension, therefore, was not always absorbed by the consumer or planned and organized as a differentiated offer by the boutique hotels analyzed in the online reviews. This is because of the cultural repertoire or previous knowledge not being constituted in the short term or the immediatism of the ephemeral desires of the postmodern individual; that is, it cannot be faked or simulated by the consumer in the consumption of experiences.

The criteria proposed by Mossberg (2003) for providing evidence of experience were also identified in the analyses. It is evident that the reported experiences correspond to an active and dynamic process; additionally, they have a strong social dimension and describe the integration of components of meanings and a sense of pleasure. The consumer’s involvement

in this experience is the result of absorption and personal control, as his process is context-dependent; thus, this experience is intertwined with an individual’s life. Additionally, uncertainty is associated with something new.

In addition to the association with the aforementioned theoretical perspectives, another dimension associated with exclusivity - customization and personalized services - emerges from analyzing the published reviews. This dimension is characterized as a premise for the consumption of the following experiences in boutique hotels by consumers:

“I have been going there for years to celebrate a wedding anniversary. The experience is reflective of the hotel’s exclusive services.”

“In all our visits, small treats made us feel that we are in an exclusive location. The attendants remembered our names, our meal preferences, and inquired about our satisfaction.”

“The hotel was reluctant to offer exclusive and personalized services beyond a certain point.”

“We had dinner on the island. For this dinner, only one couple is welcome on the island, which is in front of the hotel’s beach.”

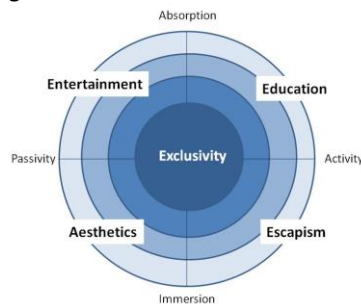
The chocolates that are left in the room at night have the initials of the residing couple. This is the extent to which the hotel provided unique and personalized services.”

“We had a prominent and exclusive experience.”

“There is a butler, private driver, and chef at our disposal. A wine cellar with a gourmet kitchen is also available for guests. These features reflect luxury.”

The issue of “exclusivity” is central to these customers, and the experience is considered legitimate if it is restricted and personalized and can make the user a “collector of special and unique moments.” That is, exclusivity is a transversal dimension because it encompasses the four dimensions originally proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999, 2014, 2016). Thus, the study proposes the insertion of a radial axis to present different levels of exclusivity in the dimensions; see Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Radial Dimension of “Exclusivity”



Source: Authors (2018).

As shown in Figure 1, the exclusivity axis penetrates all dimensions, influencing the apperception of experience in all dimensions, based on the levels of exclusivity. That is, the more exclusive, unique, and personalized the experience, the more memorable and extraordinary it will be perceived as by the

consumer. The proposed inclusion of the exclusivity axis is associated with the work of Zatori, Smith, and Puczko (2018) and corresponds to the validation that the experience’s personalization and customization affect the consumers’ processes of memory and perception of authenticity.



Lipovetsky (2009) uses the term “exclusivity” to designate the new imaginary meaning of luxury and refers to the aspiration for individualism. This supports the inclusion of the “exclusivity” axis as a new radial dimension of experience. The following are comments from the interviews, which strengthen this proposal:

“[...] In the boutique hotel, it is often the owner himself who is there. He has the owner’s eye. They are not big chains. I know how many managers... The big hotels have several managers, directors. There is no crisis for these hotels. When you have something else to offer, you stand out.” (INTERVIEWEE 1)

“I always prefer smaller hotels. More reserved. They always offer differentiated service and maintain privacy. [...]It may not offer much leisure, but it has much more privacy.” (INTERVIEWEE 2)

“I stayed at a hotel in Mexico that had a butler just for me. He put my suitcase and clothes in the closet. Every day he prepared my breakfast and asked the night before what I wanted.” (INTERVIEWEE 3)

“It is more reserved. On a vacation, we want privacy, which is maintained in a boutique hotel. Since the hotel is smaller, the


service is more personalized. The staff remembers our name and knows our housekeeping preferences. We like that extra care and attention at boutique hotels.” (INTERVIEWEE 4)

“[...] The manner in which a boutique hotel welcomes its guests captures attention. Maybe the hotel aims to provide a unique service to all customers. I think that is what I like. [...]” (INTERVIEWEE 5).

To better understand the relationship between the comments and dimensions of experience, we collected the images and categorized them by following Schroeder (2006), Rose (2007), Bell and Davidson (2013), Pink et al. (2016), and Gomez Cruz (2017).

After analyzing the images, it was possible to thematically group them for interpreting the process of the construction of sense and meaning of the creation of each image. The user-posted images were divided into the following five conceptual categories, according to the repetition and similarity in the process of symbolic constitution: gastronomy, relaxation, landscape, accommodations, and collective facilities (Table 6).

Table 6 - Travelers’ reviews on hotels: TripAdvisor and Instagram

Image	Category and Number of Images	Note
	Gastronomy: 132	Images of gastronomic elements follow a recurring pattern of photos of food items and wine or other beverages. This is an iconic element of the representation of the boutique hotel experience.
	Relaxation: 89	Images with connotations of relaxation present visual elements of swimming pools, spas, and aquatic environments that value moments of rest and well-being. Most of the pictures portray an individual alone, without showing other guests in the surroundings.
	Accommodations: 56	Accommodations were represented by beds made in hotel rooms or intimate spaces for relaxation, such as pools, <i>ofuros</i> , and internal spas.
	Collective installations: 42	Most images of the collective areas are represented by leisurely ambience, mostly of pools and the hotels’ wet areas.

Source: Authors (2018).



The visual elements follow a symbolic pattern and resemble each other in their production context. In general, images with private contexts seem to hold greater meaning and representativeness for users. Users emphasized the following themes highly: relaxation, art, high cuisine, accommodations with special layouts, personalized services, and landscapes. That is, these elements connect more with the dimensions of users' experience and present a specific outcome for understanding the consumption of experiences in boutique hotels. The themes associated with the dimensions of experience can be observed in isolation or when grouped with more than one dimension. The more dimensions the consumer absorbs, the higher will be the consumer's perception of experience, which corroborates the theoretical precepts. As an example, an image of a couple with wine glasses and a beautiful landscape in the background represents elements of gastronomy, landscape, and relaxation. These aspects are associated with both aesthetics and escapism.

4. Final considerations

Since this is a phenomenological and interpretative study, the observations consist of one certain cut, according to the lens of the researcher. As for the work of Pine and Gilmore (1999, 2014, 2016), this research sought to contribute to literature by validating the perception of the four dimensions of experience in boutique hotels. The study also contributed by including a new exclusivity radial axis when applying the original model proposed by Pine and Gilmore; this radial axis is associated with the concept of personalization and uniqueness. The inclusion of this new axis supports and lends continuity to research (Zatoriet al., 2018) on the relationship between personalization and the process of memorization and perception of the experience's authenticity. The perception of exclusivity related to the consumption of experience is also associated with studies on perceived exclusivity in luxury experiences (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Lanier & Rader, 2015; Walls et al., 2011). Studies on tourist experiences (Prebensen et al., 2014; Sfantla & Bjork, 2013; Tussyadiah, 2014) also show that such experiences are constructed. Moreover, the observed results corroborate the work of Henning-Thurau and Walsh (2003), who consider self-exaltation as the main factor motivating online comments. Concerning studies on the Internet as a potential research tool for understanding the postmodern consumer, this study aims to extend research in the context of postmodernity (Skandalis et al., 2016). It extends the study of Samuels (2008) and Tavares (2015), with an emphasis on the individual's virtualization. Thus, this study empirically corroborates prior research on individuals' search for differentiation in a scenario of the supremacy of individualism, hedonism, and narcissism (Lipovetsky&Serroy,2015).

Continuing the studies of David et al. (2013) and Sorensen and Jensen (2015) on the specificities of boutique hotels, we verified that boutique hotels have their own characteristics and are focused on personalization and quality of the services provided. We showed that a boutique hotel mainly provides a

unique and memorable experience. Thus, the emergence of boutique hotels is associated with the emergence of the new postmodern consumer. Therefore, obtaining a better representation of boutique hotels can benefit the sectors comprising the hotel industry and generate greater clarity among companies operating in the area.

Additionally, use of TripAdvisor as a data collection tool lent continuity to the studies of Gretzel and Yoo (2008); Kolb (2017); Racherla, Connolly, and Christodoulidou (2013); Zhang et al. (2017). These studies focus on the platform and recommend its utilization for different contexts of tourism experiences. The use of TripAdvisor and Instagram as tools of data collection and netnographic interaction represents an innovation in the area of organizational studies.

The consumption of experiences in boutique hotels is associated with the postmodern characteristic of hyperreality. This finding corroborates the study of Baudrillard (1991) and the debate by Atwal and Williams (2009) on hyperreality and images by pointing out that they are the most relevant elements in the consumption of luxury experiences. The use of online simulation environments, such as social media, prioritizes the image, strengthens this profile of consumption, and legitimizes the experience consumed.

4.1 Limitations

When using TripAdvisor for selecting users, we found that users of the community are not as interactive on this platform as was initially believed. We noted that forum debates had low adherence. Another limitation involves the selection of Brazilian boutique hotels to identify consumers. The best Brazilian boutique hotels were selected according to their rankings. However, selection of a large number of hotels or other hotel profiles might have offered new insights. A comparison between Brazilian and international boutique hotels to understand the similarities and differences in their understanding of the concept and practical characteristics of these markets - as proposed by Scott, Laws, and Boksberger (2009) for New Zealand's boutique hotels - could have expanded the insights on boutique hotels. Another limitation arises from the study's nature, which makes it impossible to generalize the findings or apply them to another context without previous empirical validation. This aspect restricts the conclusions and analyses of the case studied.

4.2 Suggestions for future research

Other issues that caught the researchers' attention and deserve mention are the rise of digital influencers in tourism and other online content producers. Although not the focus of the research, the interviewed participants occasionally presented this profile, and their characteristics are in line with the behavior of the postmodern individual. Another insight refers to respondents' comments reflecting their motivation to generate or attract envy. This might be analyzed as a new attribute of postmodern consumer behavior. Thus, new studies



applying the same methodology to examine hotels from other countries, guests of other nationalities, and other boutique hotel profiles, with the aim to understand whether the online manifestations are similar or there are differences between regions and consumer profiles, would be useful. Another suggestion is to deepen research that aims to examine the choice of other types of tourist experiences that go beyond hotels, or even experiences other than tourist experiences. This will help to discover whether this phenomenon is present in other contexts and whether it is influenced by hedonistic consumption. As per Heinonen and Medberg (2018), different aspects of online consumer behavior have been atop the netnographic research agenda, and a variety of marketing research has been conducted.

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