

Illuminating experience's inception and evolvement: an auto hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry

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Purpose – Contemporary service literature generally agrees that experience is highly subjective and therefore dynamic and temporal in nature as it is phenomenologically determined by beneficiary at service encounters. While the service literature has greatly emphasized experience as in situ during service encounters, there is sparse knowledge about how experience is shaped and re-shaped before and after service encounters. The purpose of this study is to closely examine this relationship starting with the notion of experience inceptions, which are the moments that consumer experience commences.

Design/methodology/approach – To grasp the highly subjective construct of experience inception and making sense of the relationship between experience in service encounters and beyond, we rely on an auto hermeneutic phenomenological approach. This implied a systematic self-observation and deployment of techniques to directly access the entire 'lifeworld' experience spectrum as a consumer. In a nine-month period, data was collected about the entire experience spectrum of being a consumer in daily activities. Analytically, the hermeneutic cycle act as guidance in interpreting specific parts of the data whilst zooming out to the whole.

Findings – Preliminary findings deepens and expand experience's characteristics. First, we show that experience is eminently dynamic and sensitive to contingencies such as sudden twists and turns while still reaching out to the desired experience. In a broader sense, we uncover in detail triggers to inception and transitional features that drive experience as 1) lived-through, 2) living in situ and 3) imaginary, which account for actual and mental service encounters.

Implications – This study advances experience in service theory in multiple ways. We deepen how experience and therefore experiences of service consumption processes are formed and how they evolve. This in turn renders more contextual detail to the notion of journeys starting from the level of inception. Through the findings that detail how experience arises and evolves at consumers, practitioners can pose a more granulated view on consumers' stimuli that allows them to better anticipate on and 'manage' the value experience. Finally, this study expands the methodological underpinnings of experience by introducing the value of auto hermeneutic phenomenology as an effective data collection instrument to grasp subjective experiences in sequence.

Originality/value – This study poses a microlevel based and first-hand view on the deeper levels of experience in journeys. Furthermore, this study coins an auto hermeneutic phenomenological approach on experience in marketing theory, which sparks the discussion on using novel methodological approaches to investigate value experience.

Key words – Experience, inception, service encounters, auto hermeneutic phenomenology, systematic self-observation

Paper type – Research paper