



Revisiting consumption experience

A more humble but complete view of the concept

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Abstract. *The notion of experience entered the field of consumption and marketing with Holbrook and Hirschman's pioneering article of 1982. Twenty years later, this notion has become a key element in understanding consumer behaviour, and, in some views, a foundation for the economy and marketing of the future. In our view, however, this development is not without its risks, as the concept of experience is still ill-defined or, worse, defined in ideological terms. To this end, the present paper looks 1) to give an overview of the different meanings ascribed to the word 'experience' in various scientific disciplines and to detail the different meanings ascribed to the notion of consumption experience; and 2) to highlight, using a deconstructive approach, that in the field of marketing we must use a typology of consumption experiences which goes beyond an ideological view that tends to consider every experience as extraordinary. **Key Words** ● contemplative time ● experiential marketing ● extraordinary experience ● romanticism*

Introduction

Following the marketing mid-life crisis of the 1980s which led to an explosion of the discipline in different panaceas (Brown, 1993), many of those involved professionally and academically in marketing had hoped that the 1990s would bring a re-focusing on a solid and innovative concept, that of the relationship. In effect,



marketing took on this concept, which up to then had been left to the sociologists, in order to make it the new heart of the discipline in place of the transaction. However, as pointed out by Blois in 1997, in adopting the concept, marketing considerably reduced the significance of the concept of relationship: 'the risk of viewing relationships as if they must involve (as advocated by relationship marketing theory) commitment and an almost blanket trust is to ignore the rich diversity of relationships which not only exist but also are appropriate in different contexts' (Blois, 1997: 63). In Blois' opinion, unless a counter-intuitive definition of a relationship is used, all companies have relations with their customers and vice versa, and the level of trust and involvement vary considerably along a scale from none to extremely important.

At present, while limitations are apparently becoming evident in the relationship approach (Fournier et al., 1998) and its more pompous derivative CRM (Rigby et al., 2002), marketing is looking for a new way out linked to the concept of experience (Hetzl, 2002). The notion of experience entered the field of consumption and marketing with Holbrook and Hirschman's pioneering article of 1982. Twenty years later, this notion has become a key element in understanding consumer behaviour (Addis and Holbrook, 2001), and, above all, a foundation for the economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and marketing (LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Schmitt, 1999) of the future.

In our view, however, this approach continues to lack a solid foundation, because the concept of experience is still ill-defined or, worse, defined in ideological terms, as occurred in the last decade with the concept of relationship. Every experience appears to be extraordinary (LaSalle and Britton, 2003) and/or memorable (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Before going further in this direction, it would seem to be a good idea to learn from the past, so as not to deform the concept of experience with an excessively reductive and normative approach, and in order to protect experience from the distortions that we, as marketing experts, have already inflicted on the concept of relationship. Indeed, 'we so love our new holy words that we turn them into clichés and commonplace, forgetting for the moments that we must maintain their spirits as well as their meanings' (Abrahams, 1986: 48).

To this end, the present paper aims:

- First, to give an overview of the different meanings ascribed to the word 'experience' in various scientific disciplines and to detail the different meanings ascribed to the notion of consumption experience;
- Second, to advocate, using a Latin deconstructive approach, that in the field of marketing we must use a typology of consumption experiences which goes beyond an ideological view that tends to consider every experience as extraordinary.



The notion of experience

Definitions of experience outside management science

In all languages, the word experience has become an all-embracing term which is often used to indicate some experience that a person has during everyday life. Furthermore, each scientific discipline has derived its own conception adding to a range of meanings which is already disordered. For the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*,

the most immediate and current sense of the notion of experience presents two contrary but linked aspects: passivity and activity. Experience can be said to present spontaneously the idea of a test or, in other words, 'to test' means to receive and accept. Acceptance represents the minimum action in the notion of experience. It is possible to go one step further and refer to the current expression which implies that 'we learn a lesson from experience'. The expression has a double meaning: to say that we learn a lesson means that we were changed by the experience. It is clear that the idea of gain is added to that of test.

It is this sense of gaining knowledge that is implied in the North American expression, 'experience is the best teacher'.

More specifically, relatively distinct meanings appear to be emerging in the following areas:

- For science, in the generic sense inherited from positive sciences, an experience is similar to an experiment based on objective facts and data that can be generalized. It is important to recognize a distinction between experience in general and a scientific experience. A common experience provides the individual with particular knowledge, a scientific experience provides universal knowledge valid for all. Before science 'the subject of experience was the common sense present in every individual, while the subject of science is the we or intellect agent separated from experience' (Agamben, 1989: 25).
- For philosophy, an experience is a personal trial which generally transforms the individual: 'experience something' ('I tried . . .') usually leads to the accumulation of 'experience' ('I have experience in . . .') and thus of knowledge. Moreover, this is singular (of a given individual) and not universal (outside the individual) knowledge. Experience is therefore gained when what happens is translated into knowledge (common sense), not only when it remains a simple lived occurrence. Thus, 'reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience' (Dilthey, 1976: 161). But, in our (post)modern world, this type of personal knowledge seems to be increasingly rare, as it has been undermined and replaced by scientific knowledge. The attempt to translate the everyday into experience is becoming ever more difficult.

Today, every discussion about experience must start from the point that it is no longer presented as something that can be realised. In a normal day, there is almost nothing left that could be translated into experience. Modern man goes home in the evening with a myriad of entertaining and boring, strange or ordinary, pleasurable or atrocious events, none of which has been converted into experience. It is precisely this impossibility to translate events into experience that makes everyday life more unbearable than ever before. Not for nothing does this represent a decline in quality and a claimed lack of significance of contemporary life. (Agamben, 1989: 19–20)



- For sociology and psychology, an experience is a subjective and cognitive activity which allows the individual to develop. The notion of experience is generally defined (Dubet, 1994: 93) as 'a cognitive activity', 'a test', 'a means to construct reality and, above all, to verify it'. The individual's subjectivity, constructed in the course of multiple experiences, represents 'a subjective view directed to the Io to give sense and coherence to experiences that are by nature disparate' (Dubet, 1994: 184). As such, there is (Dewey, 1934) an intrinsic connection between experience, whether natural or social, and aesthetic form. Today, for each individual, social action can no longer be considered as playing a social role and acting as programmed, but as the construction of experiences. The role is replaced by the experience, each experience demands a personal involvement in the task to undertake. Indeed, in addition to liberating traditional social roles, the postmodern idea of constructing personality via experience can be seen as a new form of alienation for the individual. The experiences of rupture, which are important in the construction of the individual (Richardson, 1999), are called 'peak experiences' (Maslow, 1964), 'epiphanic experiences' (Denzin, 1992) or 'flow experiences' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).
- For anthropology and ethnology, experience is the way in which individuals live their own culture and, more precisely, 'how events are received by consciousness' (Bruner, 1986: 4). In conceptual terms, it is also distinguished from the concept of event, as the latter is something general which happens to others, to society, to the world. Experience is something singular which happens to the individual (Abrahams, 1986: 55). It also differs from mere individual behaviour, which can be described by an external observer and concerns a routine through which the consumer simply passes. An experience not only involves an intensity of personal feeling that takes it out of the flow of the everyday life but also a framing operation by which the ongoing activity is translated in a reportable story. Individual experience presented in this way presents problems of cognisance. It is not directly accessible to researchers (who only have access to their own experience), so they can only interpret what subjects express orally, in writing or in their behaviour. 'Expressions are the peoples' articulations, formulations, and representations of their own experience' (Bruner, 1986: 9).

Definition of experience in management science

Even with regards to the specific context of consumer behaviour and marketing, definitions are not unitary. For researchers of consumer behaviour, an experience is above all a personal occurrence, often with important emotional significance, founded on the interaction with stimuli which are the products or services consumed (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). This occurrence may lead to a transformation of the individual in the experiences defined as extraordinary (Arnould and Price, 1993). Taking up the argument of sociology (Miller, 1998; Ritzer, 1999), research on consumer behaviour considers (Vézina, 1999) experience as a central element of the life of today's consumer, a consumer who is looking for sense:



for the post-modern consumer, consumption is not a mere act of devouring, destroying, or using things. It is also not the end of the (central) economic cycle, but an act of production of experiences and selves or self-images . . . The way to enhance and enchant life is to allow multiple experiences, to be sensed emotionally as well as through reason, utilizing all the aspects of being human . . . Life is to be produced and created, in effect, constructed through the multiple experiences in which the consumer immerses. (Firat and Dholakia, 1998: 96)

As a consequence, a key concept developed along with experience is the one of immersion: the postmodern consumer is said to take pleasure 'in being immersed in McDisneyfied banalities' (Thompson, 2000: 134). Indeed, there is the recognition of a 'growing quest on the part of the contemporary consumers for immersion into varied experiences' (Firat, 2001: 113), more and more conceptualized as 'embodied experiences' (Küpers, 2000; Sherry, 1998). The roots of this so-called experiential consumption (as opposed to functional consumption; Addis and Holbrook, 2001) must be sought in the growth of services, for which 'the "good" that is purchased is an experience rather than a material object' (Campbell, 1995: 110). Its main feature is to grant space to emotions. This leads to an experiential approach to the study of consumption which recognises the importance of variables that have previously been neglected:

the roles of emotions in behaviour; the fact that consumers are feelers as well as thinkers and doers; the significance of symbolism in consumption; the consumer's need for fun and pleasure; the roles of consumers, beyond the act of purchase, in product usage as well as brand choice, and so forth. (Addis and Holbrook, 2001: 50)

In the experiential perspective, the consumption experience 'is no longer limited to some pre-purchase activity (the stimulation of a need, the search for information, assessment, etc.), nor to some post-purchase activity, e.g. the assessment of satisfaction, but includes a series of other activities which influence consumers' decisions and future actions' (Vézina, 1999: 62). Consumption experience is thus spread over a period of time which, according to Arnould et al. (2002), can be divided into four major stages:

- The *pre-consumption experience*, which involves searching for, planning, day-dreaming about, foreseeing or imagining the experience;
- The *purchase experience*, which derives from choice, payment, packaging, the encounter with the service and the environment;
- The *core consumption experience*, including the sensation, the satiety, the satisfaction/dissatisfaction, the irritation/flow, the transformation;
- The *remembered consumption experience* and the *nostalgia experience* activates photographs to relive a past experience, which is based on accounts of stories and on arguments with friends about the past, and which moves towards the classification of memories.

As a consequence, the consumption experience cannot be reduced to the sole shopping experience, e.g. the experience at the point of sale (also called 'service encounter' in services research; Carù, 1996). This concept of shopping experience is based on work which since the 1970s has looked at purchasing behaviour at the



point of sale and sought to go beyond the hypothesis of consumer rationality. This first revealed a type of consumer termed 'recreative' (Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980). Later, broader studies highlighted hedonistic behaviour in most consumers, so moving attention from the utilitarian to the hedonistic value of shopping (Babin et al., 1994). The consumer is thus seen as an individual emotionally involved in a shopping process, in which the multi-sensory, imaginary and emotive aspects, in particular, are sought and appreciated. At this point, retailing research joined with the sociological studies interested in the same issues (Codeluppi, 2000; Falk and Campbell, 1997) which assume that the enjoyment derived from shopping does not come from buying, wanting or desiring products, but that shopping is a socio-economic means to socialize, to enjoy oneself and the company of another person while making given purchases. Hedonistic and utilitarian motivations thus become so closely intertwined that it seems wrong to act against them (Falk and Campbell, 1997). Examples of shopping experiences range from cultural consumption in museums (Goulding, 2000) to 'spectacular consumption' at Nike Town Chicago (Penaloza, 1999; Sherry, 1998).

For marketing (Hetzl, 2002; Schmitt, 1999) and economy (Gupta and Vajic, 2000; Pine and Gilmore, 1999), an experience is mainly a type of offering to be added to merchandise (or commodities), products and services, to give a fourth type of offering which is particularly suited to the needs of the postmodern consumer. Indeed, there is a shared belief among these authors that the postmodern or 'millennial consumer' (Holbrook, 2000) is simply not what the rational model of marketing wanted her/him to be. Thus, for marketing, a good experience is 'memorable' (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), if not 'extraordinary' (LaSalle and Britton, 2003), allowing this consumer to exploit all his/her senses (Schmitt, 1999) through the staging of the activity/physical support/social interaction triptych (Gupta and Vajic, 2000). This type of experience produces emotions (in marketing, emotional experience or emotion is often cited as the heart of the consumption experience) and also transformations in individuals.

Some industry experts argue that economic value now turns on more than a high-quality product or good service delivery: it turns on engaging customers in a memorable way – offering them an experience, or even better, transforming them by guiding them through experiences. These experts argue that economic value increases as offerings move from commodities to transformations . . . When offering experiences marketers are concerned with staging the experience – making it memorable and personal. (Arnould et al., 2002: 423)

Offering experiences is supposed to be a solution to avoid the commodity trap (LaSalle and Britton, 2003) for any kind of business including pure retailing (Kim, 2001) where the aim is to build up a set of strategies – such as retailtainment or shoptainment – which seek to offer the consumer physical and emotional sensations during the shopping experience (Codeluppi, 2001).

In a very operational view of experiential marketing, Pine and Gilmore (1999) define the four realms (entertainment/educational/escapist/aesthetic) of a consumption experience, starting from the intersection of the following two dimensions:



Exhibit 1

An example of the arguments used by experts in experiential marketing

'Increasingly, marketers understand that consumers are living human beings with experiential needs: consumers want to be stimulated, entertained, educated and challenged. They are looking for brands that provide *meaningful experiences* and thus become part of their lives...Experiences are personal events that occur in response to some stimulations (e.g. as provided by marketing efforts before and after purchase). An experience *involves the entire living being* and can be infused into a product, used to enhance a service, or created as an entity into itself. Experiences provide consumers a way to engage physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and *spiritually* in the consumption of the product or service making the interaction *meaningfully real*'.

Source: Momentum Experiential Marketing (McCann-Erickson) website, 2002.

- The customer participation in the experience, from passive (weak) to active (strong);
- The individual's connection with the environment of the experience – or environmental relationship – from absorption (weak) to immersion (strong).

The first dimension essentially concerns the physical participation of the individual. If participation is weak, the individual can neither act nor influence the execution of the experience. In contrast, if participation is strong, the individual can act and influence the execution of the experience. The second dimension concerns the type of connection between the individual and the surrounding environment. A weak connection occurs if the individual is absorbed by the experience and remains relatively estranged to the context. A strong connection results from the individual's total physical and mental immersion in the context of the experience.

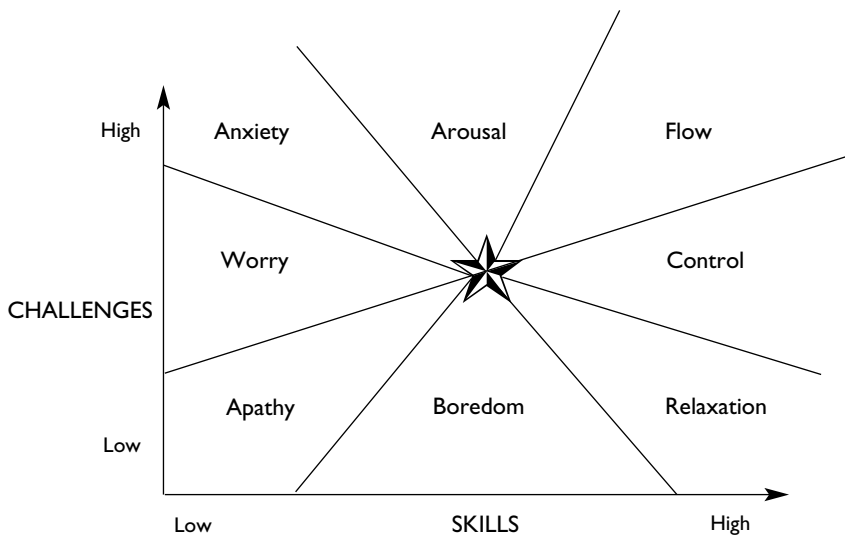
This analysis shows that consumer behaviour research adopts a conceptualization relatively close to that used in the social sciences and philosophy. Experience is defined as a subjective episode in the construction/transformation of the individual, with, however, an emphasis on the emotions and senses lived during the immersion at the expense of the cognitive dimension. Marketing, on the other hand, gives experience a much more objective (rather than subjective) meaning, confirming the idea that the result may (must?) be something extremely significant and unforgettable for the consumer immersed into the experience.

Consumption and experience typologies

Without wishing to categorize too closely the different interpretations given to the consumption experience, attention can be drawn to the sub-categories proposed in the literature (see Richardson, 1999 for a list). In this respect, the most fruitful model is that proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1997), and recently taken up by con-

Figure 1

Csikszentmihalyi's experience typology (1997)



sumer behaviour research (Arnould et al., 2002; Novak et al., 2000), that underlines the specific case of ‘flow experiences’, in which maximum psychic energy is required (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Two main dimensions differentiate the types of experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997): the skills and the challenge. The flow occurs when the skills and the challenge are both at a maximum. ‘A flow experience for one consumer may be boring or irritating to another consumer – it depends on their skills and challenges . . . Only a small fraction of consumer experiences can be classified as flow activities. Nonetheless, flow activities are pivotal because they represent peak experiences’ (Arnould et al., 2002: 427).

Despite the existence of different experience typologies, it is the flow experience with its idea of total immersion or plunge which has most attracted researchers, in particular those working on consumer behaviour, who (Arnould and Price, 1993) have compared it to the peak experience conceptualized by Maslow (1964) in the 1960s with reference to religious ecstasy. The experience has also been compared (Arnould and Price, 1993) to the epiphanic experience described by Denzin (1992) and to the extraordinary experience introduced by Abrahams (1986). For Denzin (1992: 26), ‘epiphanic experiences rupture routines and lives and provoke radical redefinitions of the self. In moments of epiphany, people redefine themselves. Epiphanies are connected to turning-point experiences’. Denzin (1992: 83) proposes a typology of epiphanic experiences:



There are four forms of epiphany:

- the major upheaval, which changes a life for ever (e.g. a man kills his wife);
- the cumulative, which refers to the final build-up of a crisis in a person's life (e.g. a battered woman finally leaves home);
- the illuminative moment, in which the underlying existential structures of a relationship or situation are revealed (e.g. the family dinner depicted in John Huston's 1987 film *The Dead*, taken from Joyce's *The Dubliners*);
- and the relived moment, where after an event occurs, the individual draws the consequences (e.g. a widow who gradually feels free to accept a new love in her life).

However, outside consumer research, Abrahams (1986) tempers this over-emphasis on peak or epiphanic experiences and proposes the dichotomy between 'ordinary experience' and 'extraordinary experience' in a processual perspective, e.g. life is a temporal flow and every experience occupied a position in a time sequence. An ordinary experience corresponds to everyday life, routine, the past, and the passive acceptance of events. An extraordinary experience corresponds to 'more intense, framed and stylized practices' (Abrahams, 1986: 50). Using the same anthropological approach, Turner (1986) refers to Dilthey's distinction between 'mere experience' and 'an experience': 'mere experience is simply the passive endurance and acceptance of events. An experience, like a rock in a sand Zen garden, stands out from the evenness of passing hours and years and forms what Dilthey called a structure of experience' (Turner, 1986: 35). It is this distinction which is seldom used in marketing to differentiate between what is called (Schmitt, 1999) mundane and extraordinary or memorable experiences.

That said, from the beginning of the 1990s, Arnould and Price (1993: 41) show that a sporting activity such as:

river rafting provides absorption and integration, personal control, joy and valuing, a spontaneous letting-be of the process, and a newness of perception and process . . . In the current historical and cultural context, it can be argued that these themes are deeply frustrated values that American consumers seek and prize. For many consumers intense, positive experiences crystallize selfhood, provide life meaning and perspective, confer awareness of one's own mortality, reduce anxiety, and improve for coping. (Arnould and Price, 1993: 41)

All that! It is clear why the Arnould and Price text on the experience of river rafting inspired many researchers working on experience in marketing, researchers who, as they have gone along, have tended to replace the concept of 'experience' with that of 'extraordinary experience' or 'flow experience', as every experience has to be extraordinary (LaSalle and Britton, 2003) and the immersion into this flow experience is the reference concept.

As a consequence, some effort has been made to underline clearly the difference between the simple pleasure of an ordinary or mundane experience and the enjoyment of an extraordinary or flow experience, indicating the latter as the target to realize. In their discussion of hedonism, O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002) insist on the need to understand fully the nature of a flow experience, in order to arrive at a clear definition of the difference between 'pleasure' and 'enjoyment':



Csikszentmihalyi views enjoyment as optimal experience and distinguishes this enjoyment from mere pleasure, which he sees as resulting from a reflex response built into the genes for the preservation of the species . . . Though pleasurable experiences can on occasions be optimal experiences (enjoyment), pleasure is generally evanescent . . . Only if the pleasurable experience involves intensity of attention, sense of achievement and psychological growth, does pleasure become enjoyment. (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002: 540)

A more humble but complete view of the concept of experience

Consumption experience versus consumer experience

Moving on to consider the consumption experience, it is essential to go beyond a view of experience which is totally dependent on what the market offers. The sociology of consumption (Edgell et al., 1997) has highlighted four typologies of consumption experience in function of the mode of provision, which is not just a market question. These are family experiences resulting from family ties, friendship experiences resulting from reciprocal relations within a community, citizenship experiences linked to relations with the state, and consumer experiences connected to exchanges with the market (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows that an individual's daily consumption is made up of a consumption experience that can occur with or without a market relation. Each consumption is not, therefore, necessarily a market consumption experience or 'consumer experience'. The consumption experience of a meal at a friend's house is linked to a sphere outside the market, even if products from the market may be consumed. In the same way, the communal consumption of a self-produced show is outside the notion of a consumer experience (consider, for example, the experiences at the Burning Man Festival, Kozinets, 2002). Thus, for the sociologists of consumption, 'social relations shape the experience of consuming' (Edgell et al., 1997: 5). Moreover, marketing is only interested in the specific social context of the market, in which the individual is a consumer living experiences with the supplier and with other consumers. This also leads to the fact, noted by various authors (Rifkin, 2000), that, in general, we have become essentially consumers, and that our social context essentially involves relations with other individuals-consumers. In this light, the classification of experience based on the mode of provision finds little consideration.

The weight of this sociological classification of the consumption experience can be understood with reference to work in marketing on the concept of exchange, work which has sought to delimit the field of marketing (Bagozzi, 1974; Pandya and Dholakia, 1992). If marketing is exchange, then when there is no exchange, the individual no longer lives experiences as a consumer, but experiences of consumption which are outside the market. Provision from re-distribution by the state (through public services, for example), or through reciprocity (among a group of friends), and, above all, through gifts does not lead to the market (they are 'beyond the market'; Cova, 1999) nor to consumer experiences.



Table 1

The conditions of consumption experience

Mode of provision	Access conditions/ social relations	Manner of delivery	Social context
Market	Price/exchange	Managerial	Consumer with other consumers
State	Need/right	Professional	Citizens/users with other citizens
Household	Family/obligation	Family	Members of the family with other members
Communal	Network/reciprocity	Volunteer	Friends or neighbours with other friends or neighbours

Source: adapted from Edgell et al., 1997

North American roots of extraordinary experiences

Given the above arguments, it can be claimed that a consumption experience is not an experience planned by particular market players ('a consumer experience'). A second relevant consideration is the fact that each consumption experience is not necessarily memorable or unforgettable, as the supporters of the economy and experiential marketing would like. Schmitt himself (1999), the great initiator of experiential marketing, admits as much, almost with embarrassment, on the last page of his propaganda-like study: 'most brands and marketing campaigns, most of the time, are unable to provide these types of experiences – even temporarily' (Schmitt, 1999: 251). Schmitt justifies this claim with an explanation which tends to dismantle all the attractive and brilliant elements of experiential marketing:

our organisms have not been built to undergo intense, personality-shaking experiences all the time. Religious, spiritual, and existential experiences often result in dogmatism, obsession, and serious delusions of reality. Somewhat mundane experiences of medium intensity – and even fake experience¹ – may in fact be the precondition for happiness. As such, they have an important role to play in enriching our ordinary, daily lives. (Schmitt, 1999: 251–52)

In the light of these observations, which raise doubts regarding the development of a concept of the consumption experience connected to extraordinariness, we have to understand how we have arrived at this position which risks becoming a theoretical dead end and a real managerial problem. Indeed, this search for extraordinary experiences could lead to one unexpected implication of Disney's and other similar successes: 'to make consumers dissatisfied with products and experiences that do not deliver a magical experience' (Shroeder and Dholakia,

2001). An important indication can be found in the study of the romantic roots of experiential consumption drawn up by Holbrook (1997). The author takes the work of Campbell (1987) as a point of reference to bring out the foundation of the concept of consumption experience. For Campbell (1987), the origin of experiential consumption is to be sought in the European Romantic period of the 18th century, i.e. in a way of life which privileged change, diversity and the imagination. Romanticism is associated with the search for intense pleasures and high arousal, in contrast to the tepid mediocrity of everyday life. Its philosophy is fundamentally opposed to those essentially mundane and utilitarian attitudes which characteristically accompanied modern consumption (Campbell, 1997). Romanticism underlies our present model of consumption, a model which moves increasingly further away from the pure functionalism of the response to needs (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). As a result, consumers become the hero of a 'novel', the novel of their everyday lives. This allows Holbrook (1997) to propose the following logical sequence: 'romanticism → experiential consumption → emotional responses → pleasure', and to insist on the fact that in this experiential approach, sensations are more important than the consumers' rational thoughts. As Pine and Gilmore (1999) later, Holbrook (1997) refers to the work of Campbell to sustain that Scitovsky (1976) is the only contemporary economist to have appreciated this romantic root in hedonistic consumption, for which the main aim of daily life is to obtain the maximum possible pleasure from all the sensations permitted by the experiences enjoyed, especially the consumption experiences.

These considerations are confirmed in the anthropological approach to experience developed by Abrahams (1986), who claims that it is American society that has taken on more decisively the romantic values of change and diversity: 'as a nation of individualists, Americans have placed ever greater importance on experience, relating it to our notions of person in constant development . . . This obsession of novelty, accompanied by a fear of boredom, is deeply implicated in the almost compulsive need to move on' (Abrahams, 1986: 59). This fear of boredom leads to an increase in risky behaviour which provokes strong emotions and extraordinary experiences, such as river rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993). The more our contemporary and organized society is at peace, the more the fear of boredom increases and with that the search for extraordinary experiences. In dangerous pastimes, 'the more the rest of life has been rendered peaceful and protected from every risk, and the more family and professional existence are beyond every fear, so the sensations experienced are that much more solicited' (Le Breton, 2002: 128). The main justification for the use of dangerous entertainment resides in the strong sense of much greater gratification than in daily life and routine experiences. Whilst in the less protected world that preceded modernity, everyday life was responsible for its share of happy and unhappy experiences, today 'the risk-free long-term projection, with the assurance that nothing will ever change and that all surprises are excluded, generates boredom and indifference, in the absence of hurdles which give individuals the chance to measure themselves against their existence' (Le Breton, 2002: 130).



What is seen in the work of Schmitt (1999), apart from the conclusion, and of Pine and Gilmore (1999), is this culturally biased, North American vision of experience which is anchored in Romanticism. This vision has been taken up by the European marketing experts, as is clear in Hetzel's conceptualization (2002: 314), which identifies five levers on action to provide consumers' experience. Although not explicitly stated, the romantic roots of experiential marketing are clearly evident in three of these five levers:²

- 'Surprise the consumer' (and above all 'respond to the need for something unexpected');
- 'Propose the extraordinary';
- 'Stimulate the five senses'.

Underlying this approach, then, is the attempt to break the monotony of the everyday, surprising the consumer and stimulating the emotions.

The ideology of the 'extraordinary' experience versus 'ordinary' well-being

This obsession with the extraordinary experience that marketing proposes in our society has recently provoked a strong reaction on the part of both European and American authors (Ritzer, 1999; Urry, 1995), which may help to reformulate the concept of the consumption experience in a more comprehensive manner. As the roots of extraordinary experiences are grounded in North American thinking, we prefer in this paper to rely on European authors to critic it; thus, we use a Latin perspective to deconstruct a North American construction (Cova, 1999). In France, for example, Bruckner (2000) attacks 'the mysticism of the peak points' and the 'search for perpetual euphoria' which constitute the ideology of contemporary society. For the author, this obligation to be happy is an ideology 'which forces everything to be assessed in terms of pleasure and displeasure, an attribution to euphoria which leaves those who do not agree in shame and discomfort' (Bruckner, 2000: 17). In this way, the author criticizes 'the enemies of boredom' and 'the society of continual entertainment' (Bruckner, 2000: 141), sustaining a vision of existence in which experiences of differing intensity co-exist:

but, above all, life must have empty days; at all costs, the different intensities of existence must be preserved, so as at least to benefit from the pleasure of change. True life is not absent, it is intermittent, a flash (splash) in the greyness for which we preserve a moving nostalgia.

Cassano (2001: 62) in Italy notes along the same lines that

we are inside an obsessive exaltation, in the most complete lack of degree. Today, this lack of degree is not only not seen as a danger, but it is sought both in production and consumption, in which the desire to 'live life to the full' and to have a 'reckless life' is the translation of the obsession of the beyond, of the intolerance of limits and the desire to exceed them.

According to Cassano (2001), this results in a fear of pauses and intervals, a need to fill up all free time with brilliant and astonishing experiences, and the cult of strong emotions.

Continuing in this direction, one of the main worries for Manzini (2001) with regard to the sustainable development of our society is precisely the disappearance of the 'contemplative time'. The disappearance is directly linked to the lifestyle sustained by the experience economy and by experiential marketing. Having for a long time been considered a particular privilege, the contemplative time is currently a waste of time to be avoided at all costs. This results in a dual trend of saturation and the acceleration of time. Every minute is saturated with activity: we 'need' to do something, and ever more quickly, in order to have the impression, or illusion, of doing more. The experiences proposed by the market do no more than compensate this loss; they are remedies offered by the market to treat the illness that it itself has caused: the disappearance of the contemplative time. They give a passing illusion of well-being to those who can pay, i.e. the consumers. For the others, those without the means to consume, the only possibility is a generalized feeling of malaise (Rifkin, 2000). The more the contemplative time disappears, the greater the proliferation of these 'remedial goods', individual, purchased experiences which progressively destroy the context of life (Manzini, 2001).

It is in this framework that we see a return to the valorisation of simpler and more common experiences, such as taking a walk, which give back the time to think. For Cassano (2001: 150), 'walking is a poor art, a doing nothing full of things, the sweet ebb back of our minimum life'. For Le Breton (2000), 'walking is an introduction to the sensations of the world, a full experience which leaves the initiative to the individual' (Le Breton, 2000: 18), 'it is a quiet way to give back appeal to time and space' (Le Breton, 2000: 19). 'Walking returns individuals to the happy sentiment of their lives. They immerse themselves in a life-style full of meditation which solicits a full response from the senses. They sometimes return changed, more willing to enjoy time than to subject themselves to the dominant urgencies of contemporary existence' (Le Breton, 2000: 11). Over and above the reference to walking, these researchers draw attention to a lifestyle based on small, daily 'nothings' which seems to become a counter-model for individuals (Urbain, 2002). With reference to tourism, for example, Urbain (2002: 89) claims that:

an ethic fed by some guilty conscience (and also some commercial interest), encourages seeing the holiday-maker as a continuously active being keen to fill all free time with a multitude of sporting and cultural activities. Imagined, as always, as eager for physical effort and discovery, the need expressed by the holiday-maker is strong enough to justify the provision and development of a multitude of services.

Urbain gives the results of some empirical research showing that the holiday-maker actually does not seem to accept this ethic, but rather resists this ideological pressure. 50% of French holidaymakers claim that 'they did nothing special on holiday' (SOFRES survey, 1997 in Urbain, 2002). The idea of the active holiday 'therefore depends principally on a hope rather than the observation of behaviour or the consideration of the reality of desires' (Urbain, 2002: 90).

Finally, it is useful to point out that many experiences are evidently not 'remedial goods' as claimed by Manzini (2001), but rather experiences situated outside



the market. Probably, it is here a question of consumption experiences, but not consumer experiences. Urbain (2002: 91) clearly shows this in the case of the *do-nothing* on holiday. “Do nothing in particular” does not mean “do nothing at all”, but rather have your own activities, and have time for yourself, during which, unlike with products, places and services defined by others, you invent another life.’ This highlights another critical fact of experiential marketing (Firat and Schultz, 1997), i.e. the desire to pre-plan every extraordinary experience for consumers, instead of letting them construct the experience themselves or with others, starting with the ‘fragments’ that are the products and services offered by the market, and the fragments that can be brought in from other modes of provision. (Edgell et al., 1997).

These are all the considerations which go to feed Schmitt’s (1999) final repentance and lead to a vision of experience such as proposed by Abrahams in the study of the anthropology of experience (1986: 68–9):

on the one hand, there is a flow of activity, and on the other, distinctive, marked-out acts and events, all going under the name of experience. Moreover, the very flow of the everyday assures the continuity between routine activities and the more extraordinary ones . . . This approach sees both the larger and the smaller experiences as creative achievements; each experience, whether planned for in some manner (practiced, run through, rehearsed) or not, is interesting only insofar as it is able to enlist a participation.

Conclusion

Starting from an analysis of the interpretation of experience within experiential marketing and of the conceptualizations used in other scientific disciplines, in particular anthropology and sociology, we have managed to identify two trends:

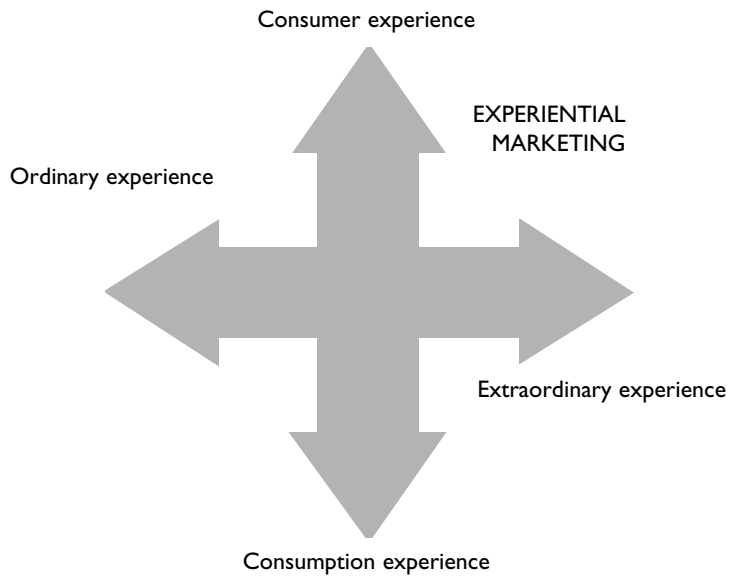
- First, a trend taken from economics to consider any consumption experience as necessarily dependent on the acquisition of products and services from the market, even if everyday life is largely comprised of experiences based on elements acquired in other ways (the family, friends, the state);
- Second, a romantic trend which seeks to over-saturate all events to construct a long series of strong emotions and unforgettable and extraordinary experiences. As observed by the Italian philosopher Agamben (1989), this is in contradiction with the fact that ‘it is precisely the everyday and not the extraordinary which once constituted the raw material of experience’.

These considerations suggest the following figure (Figure 2), as a means of giving a broader significance than that proposed in the restricted context of experiential marketing to the concept of consumption experience. We take account of the different means of provision and of the different levels of intensity of the experience, which is located along the two axes, the first defined as a continuum between ordinary and extraordinary, and the second between consumer (market) and consumption (society).

To avoid finishing again in a dead-end similar to that already seen in relation-

Figure 2

A less ideological view of the consumption experience



ship marketing, practitioners must be able to take in the full breadth of a phenomenon such as experience, from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the commercial to the non-commercial. With this, we do not wish to claim the need for a re-balance leading to a 'marketing of ordinary experience', which could, moreover, be interpreted as a pernicious approach able to penetrate into the smallest fold of our everyday lives. Rather, we suggest the need for a critical reflection on the part of all those involved in marketing (researchers, managers, professionals) regarding the role that the discipline could have in the maintenance or destruction of our living environment.

Notes

- 1 Schmitt here refers to criticism levelled at marketing experiences: deceptive and fake.
- 2 The last two levers ('Create a link with the consumer' and 'Use what the brand refers to') appear less directly linked to romanticism.

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