

# **Bridging The Gap For Destination Extreme Sports - A Model of Sports Tourism Customer Experience**

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## **Bridging The Gap For Destination Extreme Sports - A Model of Sports Tourism Customer Experience**

This longitudinal study proposes a conceptual model of sports tourism customer experience in the context of a mountain-biking extreme sport camp. Customer experience is conceptualised as a three-dimensional framework consisting of five dimensions: *hedonic pleasure*, *personal progression*, *social interaction*, *efficiency* and *surreal feeling*. Using the means-end approach in 89 semi-structured interviews with clients of a mountain-biking camp, conducted over three years, the authors identified *hedonic pleasure* and *personal progression* as the two core experiences valued by customers. The core experience generates *surreal* feelings, incomparable and memorable evaluations of the overall experience. *Social interaction* facilitates the core experience, while *efficiency* enables the core experience. Existing marketing management frameworks lack empirical investigation and social science frameworks fail to take a holistic view; our framework bridges the gap between social science and marketing literatures by exploring, testing and incorporating both streams empirically. Implications for practitioners' customer insight processes and future research directions are discussed.

### **Keywords:**

Sports tourism, Sports tourist experiences, Consumption experiences, Experiential marketing, Customer Experience, hedonic experiences

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## **Introduction**

Customer experience, and its impact on business, is receiving greater attention (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Johnston & Clark, 2008) as a key strategic objective for organisations (Verhoef et al., 2009) for building customer loyalty (Badgett, Boyce & Kleinberger, 2007). However, academics and practitioners are struggling to understand fully the concept of customer experience and its impact (Klaus & Maklan, 2011). The sports tourism industry has long acknowledged experience as a key marketing objective, but has yet to define it in a way that is actionable. Research of the impact of experience on consumer behaviour is largely descriptive and focused on exploring ‘what’ rather than ‘why’ experiences drive behaviour (Weed, 2004). This mirrors the situation in the services marketing literature, where experience is defined so broadly as to make it difficult to measure and act upon (Maklan and Klaus, forthcoming). Research is needed to develop managerially relevant conceptual frameworks exploring the sports tourism experience from both the service marketing and social science approaches (Morgan, 2007). The aim of our study is therefore to develop a “framework through which (sports) tourism marketers can strategically identify, enhance and deliver their offers”(Williams, 2006, p.487).

This article explores sports tourism customer experience in the context of a freeride mountain bike camp. Sports tourism is defined by the World Tourism Organization (2010) as specific travel outside of the customer’s usual environment for either passive or active involvement in sport where sport is the prime motivational reason

for travel. Sports tourism is a multi-billion dollar business, one of the fastest growing areas of the \$4.5 trillion global travel and tourism industry (WTO, 2010) and is now an international business attracting media coverage, investment, political interest, travelling participants and spectators. In 2011, travel and tourism are expected to be more than 10 per cent of the global Gross Domestic Product. The economies of cities, regions and even countries are increasingly reliant on the visiting golfer, mountain biker and skier. In some countries, sports can account for as much as 25 per cent of all tourism receipts. According to the British Tourist Authority and English Tourism Board, 20 per cent of tourist trips have sport participation as their prime motivation. Sport is an integral part of all culture and, while often viewed as a separate activity, it is inextricably linked to tourism.

One of the main challenges for sports tourism research is to deliver frameworks that assist organisations in managing sports tourism more effectively (Weed, 2009). In particular, frameworks underpinned by and rooted in various disciplines of marketing are needed (Weed, 2009).

The literature (Bouchet et al., 2004; Morgan, 2007) notes a lack of empirical studies in the field of sports tourism customer experience, and our study addresses this gap by exploring a sports tourism customer experience empirically and proposing a conceptual framework. The structure of the paper is as follows: we first conceptualise sports tourism and sports tourism customer experience. Next, we review existing conceptual models and synthesize the managerial/marketing and socio-psychological science approaches to generate a unified concept of sports tourism customer experience. We then explain our methodology, present findings and discuss the

implications for theory and practice. In so doing, we present a conceptual model for sports tourism customer experience and compare our findings with existing models and frameworks.

### **Sports tourism customer experience**

Scholars often credit Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) writing on hedonic consumption as a pivotal moment in the study of experience in marketing. In their study, they urge marketers to focus on the role of emotions as part of the customer experience and, subsequently, consumer behaviour. Since then, consumption experience became the focus of various scientific disciplines. On the one hand, management/marketing researchers focus on its practice and the management conceiving experience as a distinctive offer to customers (Gilmore & Pine, 2002). On the other hand, literature incorporating a social science approach, concentrates on 'extraordinary,' 'peak,' or 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997) experiences in sports tourist experiences and considers extraordinary experience as the core of sports tourism (e.g. Celsi et al., 1993; Arnould & Price, 1993).

### **Managerial/marketing sports tourism studies and frameworks**

Weed and Bull (2004) propose the unique interaction between activity, people and place as the core experience of sports tourism. Harrison-Hill and Chalip (2005) support these findings by stating that the quality of sports tourist experiences can be optimised through cross-leveraging the sport and the host destination. This literature, however, is criticised for its over-emphasis on destination (Williams 2006). Scholars argue that the consumer should be at the centre of the experience rather than the destination, suggesting that sports tourism studies fail to adapt experiential marketing theory (Williams, 2006). Bouchet et al. (2004) propose a framework comprising three

dimensions: new relationships with oneself, with the area and with others. The first dimension represents one's internal motivation, and cognitive and emotional factors. It consists of the attributes *implication* [defined as 'one's unobservable state of motivation, excitement or interest' (p. 132)], *perceived risk* (related to the possibility of sustaining a loss from the destination or the activity), *variety/novelty* (as the dynamic component in contrast to one's daily routine) and *optimal stimulation level* (used to describe one's tendency to seek excitement). However, the author acknowledges that the framework is largely conceptual and encourages researchers to generate empirical evidence to support it (Bouchet et al., 2004). Based on the Prism of Brand Identity (Kapferer, 1997), Morgan (2007) proposes a model in which customer experience is defined as the interaction between external elements controlled by organisational management and the internal elements perceived by the customer. Both frameworks recognise interaction with other customers as key aspects of sports tourist experiences. The literature refers to a sense of 'communitas' (Turner, 1974; Morgan, 2007) as outcome of common experiences shared between participants. Social interaction, personal hedonic benefit, personal progression (Green et al., 2005) and destination are identified as the key dimensions of the sports tourism customer experience.

The emergent marketing orthodoxy is that experience is either a summation of all the clues and actions as perceived by the customer (Verhoef et al., 2009), or expectancy based (Woodruff et al., 1983). The latter view holds that satisfaction or dissatisfaction is the result of a confirmation or disconfirmation of the offer's expected performance with its actual performance (Oliver, 1980). Both marketing perspectives can be

viewed as derivations of economic utility whereby consumers rationally sum their assessments over a series of events (Gronross, 1997). Researchers, however, indicate that the tourism experience cannot be solely explored through the traditional ‘value for money’ paradigm (Dodds, Monroe and Grewal, 1991). This paradigm is based on and evolved from the economic utility paradigm (e.g. Woodruff, 1997), and we will analyse and synthesise the literature in the following section.

### **Socio-Psychological research approach and frameworks**

According to Williams and Soutar (2000), the customers’ perception of tourism experience constitutes of other socio-psychological elements, such as prestige, social interaction, novelty and hedonism (e.g. Babin, Darden & Griffin, 1994; Jayanti & Gosh, 1996). This evolving conceptual division between consumer behaviour based on utilitarian values and behaviour based on socio-psychological values is noteworthy (Scott et al., 2009). It indicates that marketers need to cater their tourism offerings to the customer’s evaluation of the experience (Klaus and Maklan, forthcoming). A focus on experiences also leads to an emphasis on the emotional aspects of consumer decision-making rather than only rational cognition in consumption choices (Jennings et al., 2009). This view is supported by research identifying experiences psychologically powerful enough to alter the utility logic of assessing experiences, such as the oft-cited river rafting experience (Arnould & Price, 1993). Arnould and Price (1993) suggest that extraordinary experience has a profound impact on the life of participants, returning them “transformed”. Moreover, their research illustrates the crucial importance of emotional, social (e.g. McCannell, 1989) and epistemic components in such experiences, indicating the need for further research in this area (Williams and Soutar, 2000). Such extraordinary activities could also lead to

participants feeling more “authentic” due to the opportunity to express themselves more freely than they could in their daily life, a phenomenon known as “existential authenticity” (Wang, 2000).

Among extraordinary experiences, the most developed categories are flow and peak experiences. Schouten et al. (2007) coined the term transcendent customer experience to refer to flow and/or peak experiences in a consumption context. The two concepts are related (Privette, 1983) and sometimes overlapping in the same activities. Caru and Cova (2003) argue that, without comparing ordinary experiences derived from daily mundane life, no experience can be called extraordinary. Thus, those ordinary experiences are also important parts of our lives, which necessarily consist of different levels of intensity. As a result, they propose that consumption experiences exist on a continuum between ordinary to extraordinary rather than being mutually exclusive.

Quan and Wang (2004) suggest a two-dimensional tourist experience framework with the dimensions *peak touristic experience* and the *supporting consumer experience*, combining a socio-psychological view (peak experience) while trying to gain support for a utility-based approach (experience support). The peak tourist dimension represents attractions that constitute the major motivations to tourism and the supporting customer experience dimensions represent basic consumer needs on the journey. Both dimensions of tourist experiences are differentiated from each other but are also treated as interchangeable under certain conditions, while the two dimensions constitute an organic whole but are separated conceptually.



Building on this, and the previously cited definitions, we define sports tourism customer experience as the:

*‘Customers’ comprehensive assessment of social interaction, personal hedonic benefits, destination attributes, their relationship to the environment (social and nature) and their personal growth related to challenges and sense of communitas.’*

## **Method**

Our study explores sports tourism customer experience in the context of an extreme sports mountain-biking camp called Summer Gravity Camp (SGC) founded by the internationally renowned professional mountain-biker Andrew Shandro. The context of our study, downhill mountain-biking, is considered an extreme sport (Schreier et al., 2007), similar to snowboarding (Quester et al., 2006) and kite surfing (Schreier et al., 2007). This is consistent with the definition of Puchan (2005), describing extreme sport as a symbol of a postmodern society where people are searching for new activities to explore their limits (2005).

SGC offers week-long, freeride mountain-bike training sessions for both adults and minors, providing professional coaching and accommodation in Whistler Mountain Bike Park, Canada. The camp holds five week-long sessions a year in June and August; two of these camps are for adults. Campers include mountain-bikers from all over the world and are grouped according to their skill. Shandro and his world-

renowned coaches rotate among different groups to provide comprehensive skills training. The coaches in Summer Gravity Camp have won titles in mountain-bike competitions and have also starred in movies about the sport. They are considered superstars amongst mountain-bikers. The price of the week-long sessions ranges from GBP 1,750 to 2,750<sup>1</sup>, depending on the choice of accommodation and includes coaching, the Whistler Bike Park facilities, an indoor skills facility, breakfast, lunch, accommodation and exclusive evening events (see Appendix A).

To articulate the meaning and the domain of sports tourism customer experience, our research explores the perceptual attributes of the customers' experience through in-depth interviews using the soft laddering technique (Botschen et al., 1999; Grunert & Grunert 1995). We conducted individual in-depth interviews with 89 interviewees (of 162 total participants) during August 2008 (32 interviews), August 2009 (33 interviews) and July 2010 (34 interviews) during the adult camp week. The interviews were conducted by the principal researcher during daytime breaks and after the day had concluded in a designated area reserved for SCG clients. The participants were introduced to the principal investigator and the purpose of the interviews was outlined every morning at the client coach meeting. Participation was encouraged and the maximum number of interviews, given the time constraints, were recorded with volunteering participants. The interviews were recorded on a portable recording device and participants were briefed on the private nature and aims of the research prior to the interview. The interviewees described their experience as customers, from problem recognition and information searching, to their on-camp experience. The

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<sup>1</sup> Original amount in Canadian Dollars, converted to British Pounds at the rate prevailing when the article was written.

interviewees were adult participants of SGC, male and female. The longitudinal design allowed us to interview first-time customers, regular customers and first-time customers in the process of becoming returning customers. Table 1 contains descriptive profiles of the three samples. The samples are analogous and a  $\chi^2$  exposed that the samples do not differ significantly in terms of age, gender, household income, employment status and current residence (see Table 1). Based on this, one can conclude that the majority of SGC clients are male, residing in North America or Europe, between 26 and 45 years old, working full-time and earning more than GBP 90,000 p.a.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>2008 Sample (32)</b>	<b>2009 Sample (33)</b>	<b>2010 Sample (34)</b>
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	25	24	26
Female	3	4	4
<i>Client Status</i>			
First Time Client	24	24	25
Returning Client	8	9	9
<i>Country/Region of Residence</i>			
North America	18	16	19
Latin America	2	3	2
Australasia	2	1	2
United Kingdom	2	2	2
Continental Europe	8	10	9
Asia	None	1	None
<i>Age Range</i>			
18 to 25	4	4	3
26 to 35	13	13	14
36 to 45	12	11	11
45 to 55	3	4	5
55 to 65	None	1	1
<i>Household Income in GBP<sup>2</sup></i>			
Up to 25000	3	2	3
25001 to 40000	2	2	2
40001 to 50000	4	4	5
50001 to 75000	2	2	1
More Than 75000	21	23	23
<i>Employment Status</i>			
Self Employed	7	6	4
Working Full-Time	22	21	23
Working Part-Time	None	2	2
Student	2	4	3
Unemployed	1	None	2

Table 1 Sample Profiles

<sup>2</sup> Original amount in Canadian Dollars, converted to British Pounds at the rate prevailing when the article was written.

The interviews were transcribed and coded with the support of NVivo 8.0 independently by three researchers. The software enables the authors to reflect on the key themes and codes and compare the data (Di Gregorio, 2000; Clisbee, 2003). Coding follows the grounded approach described by Ryan and Bernard (2003), which draws heavily from Strauss and Corbin (1990). We incorporate a systematic and far-out comparison approach and hierarchical coding to ensure that we observe all the data thoroughly and explore all its dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 75-95). We achieved data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) after analysing 67 interviews, but analysed the remaining interviews to maximise the value of the data collected. A sample transcript is attached as Appendix B. The initial categorisation of all attributes was the outcome of an extended workshop involving the three coding researchers. Each attribute was named and defined. In a subsequent stage researchers discussed differences in their attribute categorisation and agreed on revised attributes and category definitions. Some constructs appeared in more than one interview. The three researchers examined transcriptions and individual codes to identify such repetitions and define standardised construct names, resulting in a coherent coding structure (see Appendix C).

To maximise the content and face validity of the dimensions generated from the exploratory research, a panel of expert judges reviewed the item pool and the generated dimensions (Dagger et al., 2007). The expert panel comprised four marketing academics familiar with the subject of tourism and customer experience. The panel members were asked what dimensions evolved from the research model and items. Using the Q-sort technique (Funder et al., 2000), each item in the initial

pool was printed on an index card and each panel member was asked to create dimensions by grouping similar aspects of the sports tourism experience. It was up to the members to decide on the number of categories he or she used and to find appropriate labels and descriptions of the categories. The proportion of agreement among the judges was high, demonstrating high reliability. The Spearman correlation coefficient between judges is  $r = 0.88$ ;  $p < 0.05$ . The sorting procedure (Moore and Benbasat, 1999) generated five categories of sports tourism experience. Finally, two marketing academics familiar with the research were given the conceptual description of the five dimensions and asked to rate them as either 'very applicable,' 'somewhat applicable,' or 'not applicable' relative to the respective dimension. Items needed to be rated at least as 'somewhat applicable' to be retained. This procedure resulted in retaining all five dimensions. The corresponding coding structure is attached as Appendix C.

## **Findings**

Five dimensions of sports tourism customer experience emerge: *hedonic enjoyment*, *personal progression*, *surreal feeling*, *social interaction* and *efficiency*. After identifying the five key dimensions, we now describe the individual attributes of each dimension in more detail.

*Hedonic enjoyment* is an essential experience factor capturing hedonism and excitement, which is felt, perceived and experienced by participants at any time in the camp; *hedonic enjoyment* expresses a deeper level of enjoyment resulting from skill mastery, risk normalisation (Celsi et al., 1993) and a state of flow. In other words, *hedonic enjoyment* in this research is distinguished from the enjoyment of

extraordinary experiences as defined by Celsi et al. (1993). *Hedonic enjoyment* is an essential experience factor. Interviewees often use ‘fun’ to describe this experience, which frequently appears in the interviews. *Hedonic enjoyment* is described as a direct, subjective and emotional part of the experience. Some campers declare hedonic enjoyment as their main aim for the camp. However, a balance between enjoyment and other experience factors is crucial. This type of experience occurs across the whole consumption experience: from meeting and getting along with coaches to taking training sessions and learning new skills. For many first-time campers, their expectation of the camp experience is to have fun: ‘I don’t know (what to expect). Just have fun I guess.’

*Goal, challenge, coaching, peer influence* and *self-motivation* are the five attributes constituting the dimension *personal progression*. Making ‘progress’, improving their freeride skills and technique, is of great value to the campers. No matter how personal progression is achieved, the experience of pursuing it and the final results are important. *Personal progression* does not include new identity development, safety or survival concern, which are parts of the efficacy motives arising from the literature focusing on extraordinary experiences (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993). Adult campers not only want to experience fun but are also looking for advancement, summarised in the dimension *personal progression*, which includes the following factors: goal-orientation, challenges, coaching, peer influence and self-motivation. No matter how progression is achieved, the experience of pursuing it and the final results are both important to an individual. Asked about their expectations of the camp, many respondents referred to their specific personal goals in detailed and technical terms. The goals are related to the specific technical mountain-bike skills that campers want

to master. It shows that adult campers come with a clear expectation of what kind of goals they want to achieve throughout the camp. Aside from the preferred skills, the campers consider other lessons learnt a bonus. Even first-time campers, who often have very vague expectations, were able to describe their aims regarding the skills in detail. With emphasis on the goals, campers demand effective means to help them achieve them in order to avoid a situation where the camp becomes a “guided tour holiday” rather than instructional. For instance, some respondents suggest that communicating their goals to coaches and setting a training objective/course agenda would be helpful.

Some interviewees believed that being challenged in a manner that would not occur in their normal environment was an important factor for their progress. Coaching is another recurring topic discussed by interviewees: it affects their camp experience in different ways but mostly regarding their *personal progression*. There are several coaching features that the campers value, such as being detail-oriented and able to observe an individual’s strengths and weaknesses, subsequently enabling campers to feel cared for and thus able to progress more swiftly through individual guidance. While respondents identify several desirable qualities of good coaching, campers assessed its effectiveness by comparing their progress with their goals.

Fellow campers, especially group members, have a huge impact on an individual’s progression. The first is related to peer pressure, such as ‘*everyone’s kind of pushing each other*’, and learning from each other’s strengths, stating: ‘*Everyone’s unique. If you got something to show, that’s good. Among some of these groups, everybody rocks.*’



In addition, group selection based on individuals' skill plays a constructive role in the personal progression. Campers mistakenly put into a group whose members are at a lower level feel less challenged. If campers join a group where other members have different aims, such as simply having fun instead of improving their skills, their progression is compromised.

Respondents identify internal factors that affect their skill progression. These factors are the qualities possessed, or developed, by individuals during the camp. They are motivated by these qualities to pursue further progression and this process forms the experience of self-motivation. For example, campers motivate themselves by persistence: *'I didn't want to end up in the middle.'* Or because they are eager to learn: *'I would love to learn; everything's learning here.'* Unlike other factors influencing progression, self-motivation is the only experience attribute of which campers have full control. With self-motivation, campers were able to take initiatives and actively contribute to their own progression.

*Surreal Feeling* - one recurring theme extracted from the interviews is the surreal and dreamlike feeling described by the interviewees. The narratives describe the feelings triggered by the extraordinary, such as meeting the stars and getting inspired by them. Participants' narratives describe feelings triggered by the extraordinary, such as meeting and being inspired by the star coaches. Respondents used metaphors to compare their camp experience to a 'dream coming true.' The campers' interest in, and connection to their coaches, is evident in the way they mention their coaches' name frequently and demonstrate extensive knowledge of their coaches'

achievements. They consider the experience of working with the stars as rare, special, exciting and extraordinary. Moreover, campers comment on how they found themselves accomplishing something they had never expected. The reason behind turning the impossible into the possible is twofold. One is related to coaching, because *'It (the coaching) amplifies all my mistakes. I was getting corrected in many different parts and goings on especially in terms, stuff like that. And I feel like a beginner again.'* The other relates to the trails and other facilities: *'I feel like they are willing to work on jumps and drops, things that we can't practise at home because we don't have those kinds of features and air dome...So I come up here to practise what I can't practise at home.'*

These 'surreal' feelings can be described as recollections of a dream-like state, an almost altered stage of reality based on a certain activity or encounter. Volo (2009) identifies such surreal feelings as the key ingredient that transforms, to contextualise in our research, a freeride camp into a memorable sports tourism experience that generates repurchase and loyalty. The *surreal feeling* constitutes one of the most important experience factors as it distinguishes this experience from daily routines. However, it is not the only meaningful experience factor.

*Social interaction* describes a sense of belonging to a community where members share common ground. This experience relates to all interaction between campers, coaches and the camp's staff members. It relates to all interaction between campers, coaches and the camp's staff members. The coaches contribute in terms of accessibility by their willingness to connect with the campers on a personal level

beyond their duties and contrary to their status as ‘superstars’ of the sport. The interviewee voiced that coaches don’t simply treat campers as their responsibility but also as friends in need of help. Fellow campers play a decisive role in the social interaction experience. Even before camp starts, campers demand an effective way to communicate between their future fellow campers. This sense of *communitas* and belonging (Turner, 1974) is similar to findings in other sports tourism studies (Morgan, 2007) and is described in multiple layers such as:

*‘What happened before day 1, day 2 is you kind of build up to initial friendships. Ride together. And off you have different interests but it's a balance between people you want to ride with and get on well with as a group. Even though one wants this, one wants that.’*

*Communitas* was established as a key factor of the post-camp experience and future purchasing decisions, as one camper states:

*‘I think it is fun to meet with all these people every year in the camp, for my taste it is getting a little big. I think a couple of years ago we had a smaller camp, maybe 40 campers, and you knew everybody and we sort of hung out together.’*

Another contributing factor is the camp staff as one camper remembers from her first-day experience: *‘Smiles were very welcoming and it tells that you are on course.’* In summary, social interaction, experienced with all the contributors and participants of the camp, creates a sense of belonging, a feeling of being part of a community.

The experience dimension *efficiency* emerges from more physical attributes and the camp's organisational flow. Asked about activities and services allowing a 'smooth' experience, interviewees almost exclusively mentioned functional features, such as a choice of coach selection and more influence on the training methods. The experience dimension *efficiency* emerges from more physical attributes and the camp's organizational flow. Asked about activities and services allowing a 'smooth' experience, interviewees almost exclusively mentioned functional features, such as a choice of coach selection and influence on the training methods. Participants acknowledge that the flexibility displayed by the camp allows them to achieve their own training goals better. This subsequently improves their customer experience by providing them with options and enabling co-creation.

Communication was discussed in four principal areas: cross-channel communication with the camp, online communication with fellow campers, pre-camp communication with SGC and the first-day 'breaking the ice' facilitation. Campers commented positively about accommodation, food arrangements, lift access and airport pick-up. Customers had only expected "basic" services given the camp's focus on extreme sports.

Throughout the interviews we detect a distinction between first-time customers, first-time customers in the process of becoming returning customers and regular customers' evaluation of their individual experiences. For example, first-time customers did not have well-defined expectations of the course in terms of *hedonic enjoyment* and *personal progression*; returning and regular customers have precise

expectations and set personal aims. Returning and regular customers have a defined perception on how the experience will perform on *efficiency* and *social interaction* while first-time customers often hold lower expectations. Returning and regular customers see the camp as an international reunion. Their interactions from former experiences alter their expectations in multiple ways: e.g. the type of coach they would like to have, the members of the group they want to ride with and what kind of trails they want to ride. However, with respect to the *surreal feeling*, we could not detect a difference between first, returning and regular customers.

## **Discussion**

As a result of our data analysis, we conclude that sports tourism customer experience constitutes five sub-dimensions, namely: *hedonic enjoyment*, *personal progression*, *surreal feeling*, *social interaction* and *efficiency*. Based on these findings, we introduce a conceptual framework built upon three levels of interaction and influences and suggest the causal relationships between these individual sub-dimensions. The three corresponding levels and dimensions are: experiences based upon individual perception and evaluation comprising *hedonic enjoyment*, *personal progression* and *surreal feeling*; experiences influenced by and related to the interaction with other participants; and experiences influenced by and related to the organiser's staff (see Figure 1).

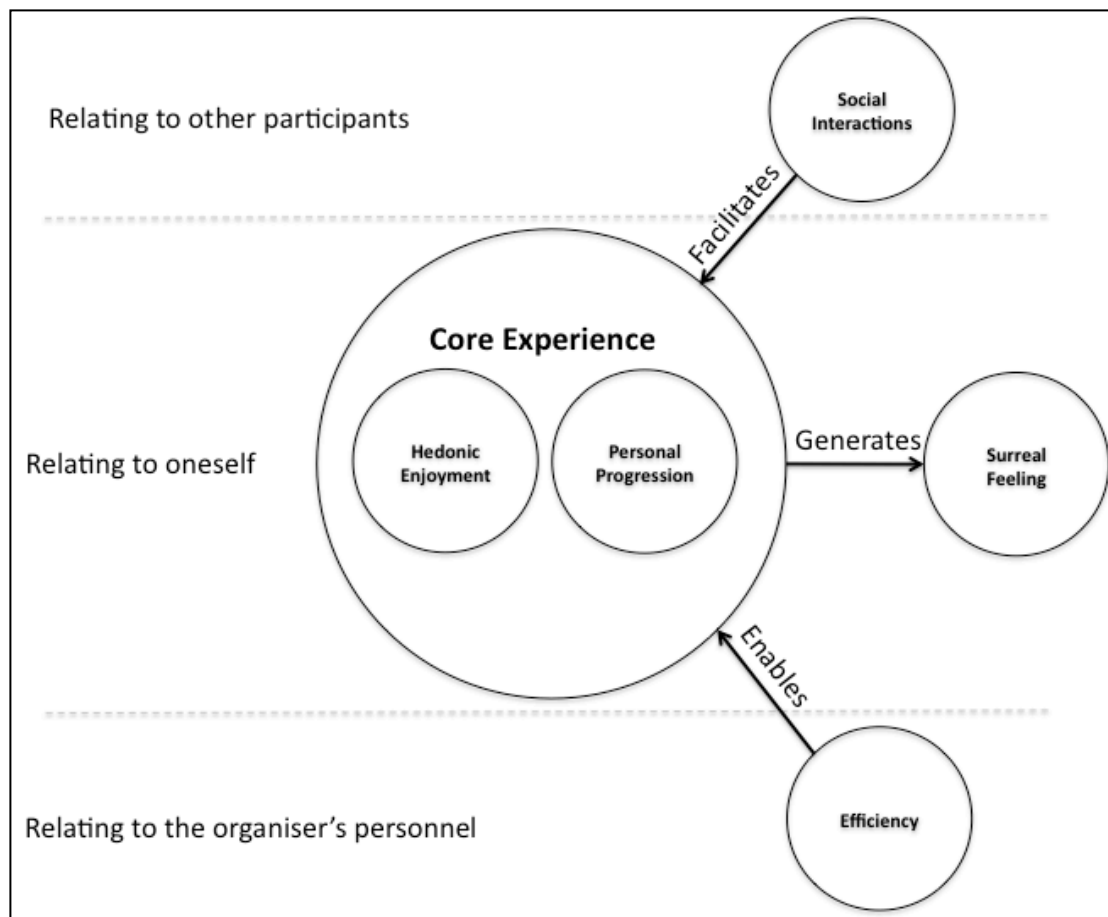


Figure 1 – Conceptual Model Sports Tourism Customer Experience

Our framework consists of three dimensions. The core experience includes experiential factors related to the customer him/herself: *hedonic enjoyment* and *personal progression*. According to the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980), expectations have a direct impact on the evaluation of experience and subsequently customer satisfaction. Consequently, the dimensions with the highest reported expectations should build the core experience of a sports tourism experience framework. The reported high expectations relating to the dimensions *hedonic enjoyment* and *personal progression* prioritise their importance in evaluating the total

customer experience that, in turn, generates customer satisfaction and repeat purchasing. Therefore, we conclude that these two sub-dimensions build the core experience.

The second dimension consists of *social interaction*, the experiential factor related to other people before, during and after the experience. This dimension, the interaction with fellow campers, staff and coaches, facilitates the core experience. Our findings establish how interaction with other parties involved in the experience enables customer progress and enjoyment.

The third dimension *efficiency* relates to the organiser and the services provided to enable the core experience for the customer. Our research establishes its importance as a key enabler of the core experience of customers, therefore responsible for permitting customers to fulfil their expectations of *hedonic enjoyment* and *personal progression*. This dimension represents the factor for which the organiser exerts greatest control and is reflected in our research by statements of customers referring to their level of expectations about the service, the service personnel and communication prior to, during and after the camp. One key finding is that customers perceive the influence of the dimension *efficiency* and its influence on the overall experience, from back-office services as well as customer-facing personnel.

Our framework confirms parts of existing frameworks, such as Morgan's (2007) work defining hedonic pleasures and achievements as the ultimate experiences of

customers, *social interaction* (Morgan, 2006) and the functional aspects as outlined in the dimension *efficiency* (Quan & Wang, 2004). However, there are also certain findings that cannot be confirmed, such as the presence of flow experiences in achievement and pleasure (Morgan, 2007) and the presence of extraordinary experiences (Abrahams, 1986, cited in Arnould & Price, 1993, p. 29). There is no significant evidence confirming the existence of extraordinary experiences in this study. Flow, recognised as one type of extraordinary experience, is not identified either. In all, the narratives and themes that emerged do not fit into the dramatic, intense and sacred characteristics of extraordinary experiences.

Some may argue that *hedonic enjoyment* and *personal progression* in this research can be related to Celsi et al. (1993) since hedonic motives and efficacy motives are comparable with *hedonic enjoyment* and *personal progression* accordingly. However, the two sets of meanings describe different levels of experiences. Firstly, *hedonic enjoyment* in our research refers to the hedonic pleasure and excitement, which is felt, perceived and experienced by participants at any time in the camp; and hedonic motives express a deeper level of enjoyment resulting from skill mastery, risk normalisation and a state of flow. In other words, *hedonic enjoyment* in this research is distinguished from the enjoyment of extraordinary experiences. Secondly, *personal progression* in this research focuses on the skill acquisition experience since the case context is a training camp. Thus, *personal progression* does not include new identity development, safety or survival concerns, which are parts of the efficacy motives. As a result, these two sets of meanings are related but different on multiple levels.



Our study could not discover evidence for extraordinary experiences in the freeride mountain-bike camp. One possible explanation is that the extraordinary experiences focus on activities only whilst this research explores the total customer experience. In addition the research object of those other two studies is extreme sports (white water rafting and skydiving). So it is questionable whether the results can be generalised across all facets of sports tourism.

We could not find evidence that the destination or location played a major role in the customers' decision-making process, despite the focal location for the case being acknowledged internationally as the 'paradise' of mountain-biking.

The findings of this research highlight *hedonic pleasure* and *personal progression* as two major experiences valued by sports tourists. It also identifies *social interaction* and *communitas*, which are recognised by management/marketing and social science literature together, thus underlining its significance. This research also identifies *efficiency* which has been overlooked by previous sports tourism studies, and highlights *surreal feeling* as an important experiential factor which incorporates and complements previous theories on tourism. This paper makes an empirical contribution to the development of a conceptual framework for sports tourism customer experience, building upon extant work which is largely conceptual. The paper uniquely integrates two main streams of scholarship in the area: that which is grounded in a social science and the more prevalent managerial approach. We believe that this broader basis for discussing customer experience in sports tourism provides an attractive foundation for new sports tourism managerial approaches and research.

## Managerial implications

We believe that the findings have relevance beyond the context of a mountain-bike camp and suggest several implications for sports tourism management and marketing. One key implication is to communicate the key drivers of experience through organisations' marketing communication, by focusing on the core experience relating to the individual: *hedonic enjoyment* and *personal progression*. Given the importance of these two dimensions in the decision-making process, organisations could, for example, use clients' testimonials highlighting these two areas. This could be enriched with testimonials of clients on the outcomes of these experiences, that is the *surreal feeling*, which was enabled and supported by *social interaction* and the *efficiency* of the service delivery. This broader focus will enable organisations to develop more effective marketing communication that focuses on the true drivers of customer loyalty instead of focusing on simply one particular aspect of the offering, such as location.

Pre-experience, most first-time campers have only vague expectations about the camp or simply expect to 'have fun'. As for returners, they have more specific expectations in terms of having fun or accomplishing a particular goal (e.g. skill acquisition). This is also true in terms of their expectations from the event organisers and their personnel. Returning and regular customers have a benchmark from their former experiences, and also wanted to be treated 'differently'. This reflects the fact that these customers do not have certain expectations regarding their skills, but are also familiar with the event and the event organisers, therefore less tolerant to incidents disallowing the enhancement of the core experience. Our research suggests that event

organisers tailor their messages differently across the three types of customers: first-time, returning and regular customers.

The findings suggest that grouping of participants significantly impacts the overall experience of customers: *hedonic pleasure*, *personal progression*, *social interaction* and even *efficiency*. Grouping affects the key dimension *hedonic pleasure* and *progression* temporally or immediately, and the key attribute of *communitas* in the short and long term, subsequently leading to customer loyalty and increased customer retention. For example, ski holiday destinations could design a variety of packages with differentiating features to group different sets of customers such as family or skilled and tailor their marketing communication accordingly.

Customers are actively involved in the activity of creating the sports tourism experience. They not only shape their own experience but also the experience of others. Therefore, companies cannot either simply offer staged experiences to customers (e.g. Klaus & Maklan, 2007), or purely focus on the activities and the location of their offering. An experience environment providing an efficient platform to enable and manage the dynamics of social interaction between the customers is essential. Event organisers should plan high-involvement activities that encourage customers to participate, providing incentives and promotional activities at the same time. For example, Summer Gravity Camp organises hiking, lake swimming and bungee jumping for campers to participate in outside of training. It also provides a public space for campers to gather and socialise with each other, therefore ensuring that the individual participant's experience is shaped through their interaction with

others. By allowing participants to build their own agenda, customers will feel a sense of involvement and these co-created experiences will distinguish themselves from others and generate memorable experiences.

It is important to distinguish supporting services from main activities in order to understand core experiences clients expect. We found evidence that bike lifts, packages, price, food and accommodation were mentioned frequently. However, what is truly valued can be explained by respondents stating that they appreciate having priority in using a public bike lift everyday in their training. What the clients really value is not the lift per se, but that as a consequence of this priority treatment they have more time to train and ride, which is the main reason why they choose the camp. For other supporting services that interfere less in the core experience (e.g. biking), customers have lower service expectations.

The research also verifies the importance of back-office activities, such as marketing and other communication prior to, and after the purchase, as enabling the core experience (Klaus, 2011). Subsequently, identifying the services adding value to the core experience will allow organisers to manage customers and services in a more effective way. After all, *efficiency* is the only factor solely controlled by the sports tourism activity organiser (e.g. the camp).

## **Directions for future research**

Given the context-specific nature of the customer experience (Klaus & Maklan, forthcoming), one might imply that the context and findings of our research might have limitations in the context of sports tourism. One limitation could be the nature of a training camp. Training camps can be different from other sports tourist products as they are also related to education. Although the factor of *personal progression* can be traced in previous research, it is possible that the educational feature biased the analysis and emphasised the factor too much. Another limitation might lie in the nature of extreme sports versus more gentle activities; extreme sports enthusiasts may emphasise unique aspects of the experience. Nevertheless, we believe that the research is beneficial to organisations offering similar offerings, such as extreme sports, skiing, snowboarding and training camps for outdoor and indoor sports.

We encourage researchers to test our conceptual framework in these contexts to examine the validity of our framework and its generalisability.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

**8:45am:** Meet in the base of the hotel.

**9-10am:** Breakfast

**10 am:** Groups board the lift with coaches ready to ride the park (camper to coach ratio of 6:1, hands on coaching for the entire week)

**12-1pm:** Lunch at the base of the bike park

**1-3pm:** Riding in the park with coaches. (If the lift-lines are long no worries at SGC we have lift-line priority, which means we can go straight to the front of the line, no other camp has this perk)

**3-5pm:** We have the Air Dome exclusively for SGC from 3-5pm everyday at camp. That means no waiting in lines like the other camps and no general public.

**3-5pm:** Campers have the ability to keep riding in the Bike Park or to check out the dirt jump lines.

**5-6pm:** Relax back at the hotel play some Nintendo Wii or go for a swim.

**6-9pm:** Grab some dinner in the Whistler Village, which is a five minute walk from

the hotel. There are numerous restaurants in town including McDonalds, Quiznos and a handful of great Pizza places. Campers can count on spending anywhere from \$15-20.

Every Thursday night is video night we show the latest MTB movies. We also show the footage from the day of filming with the campers. We have two filmers that come every Thursday and film all the campers. From that footage we make the camp DVD. All the camp footage will be available to download from the SGC website.

Sunday is arrival day, we all eat together as a group and get familiar with everyone. The rest of the week campers are on their own if they choose, but we usually eat in big groups. We have pre-arranged deals with a number of restaurants in town. The wrap up Barbeque night is Saturday. We give a ton of swag out from all of the camp sponsors. We guarantee everyone will walk away with some great goodies.

(Source: <http://www.summergravitycamps.com/camp/index.php>)

## Appendix B

**Interviewer:** There we go. That's much better. When was the first time you consciously thought about joining a free ride camp or bike camp?

**Respondent:** It was around last year. I've only been biking since November. I do mostly cross-country. There's lots of good downhill where I live.

**Interviewer:** Where do you live?

**Respondent:** North Carolina, Western North Carolina. I've only been aware of mountain-biking when ... introduced to it, went biking on a crappy bike a couple of times. Bought a nice bike. We can bike all year round. I've been biking like everyday almost since November. The exception like a couple of days here and there. And then my friend told me I'm going to this camp Whistler but the downhill scares me more than any.

**Interviewer:** Why is that?

**Respondent:** Cause of speed and I'm still new. It's harder more consequence. It's not like a people where you're going to hurt yourself so bad usually.

**Interviewer:** Unless you come out of your...

**Respondent:** I did that quite a few times but you told me about this camp. He's very

energetic. I don't think I would have gone unless he was like, yeah I do I do.

**Interviewer:** So he was the driving force behind.

**Respondent:** He is, he's a very energetic guy.

**Interviewer:** So based on that, did you do any kind of research or investigation?

**Respondent:** Oh yeah, I read all about it and it just made me more and more excited and so we're watching the movies and videos. Getting familiar, going to dirt jumps with people and do things like that. That's pretty much it.

**Interviewer:** Where did you find all this information about this camp?

**Respondent:** Actually, the mountain-biking in our area is huge. There's like a local, our college has a mountain-biking team, which is third in the nation. It's collegiate and my roommate has won the second national championship for collegiate downhill. So I mean it's everywhere. It wasn't very hard. I just started with things to do and that's pretty much it.

**Interviewer:** Did you check online?

**Respondent:** Yeah a lot of them were just shown to me being with those people...

**Interviewer:** So it was actually more, correct me if I'm wrong here. The people who are in the same new system like the marketing and the website.

**Respondent:** Yeah it was the people definitely.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So then you decided and you went to the website, was it easy to go through the digital, all the information?

**Respondent:** Yeah the website was awesome and it made me really excited cause they had this video right off the bat I just like to watch right away cause...

**Interviewer:** Sets the tone?

**Respondent:** Sets the tone for sure.

**Interviewer:** Excellent and once you signed up, when was the next communication...

**Respondent:** Actually I paid for it, I didn't have the money. It was on my birthday. My dad spotted me the money and I'm slowly paying him back...

**Interviewer:** Interesting.

**Respondent:** I've called Leanne everyday for like a week asking how many spots are left. Watch them go down to 10 slots. 8 spots, 5 spots, I was like Oh my God. I didn't know if this thing was worth it. So finally I called them one time and there were like 3

slots left and I was like shit. So I apologized to her a lot and asked her about bikes and stuff cause there aren't many bikes available that was small.

**Interviewer:** Perfect for women.

**Respondent:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Very good telling your story about...

**Respondent:** Yeah I talked to like every bike shop here and like all the bikes were way too big. Way heavy I was like a 45-pound bike is not going to fly.

**Interviewer:** So she helped you out in that perspective?

**Respondent:** Yeah, she was like keep trying, keep asking people, that's what I did. I actually borrowed a bike, a friend's bike. She let me borrow it, it was nice. It's 32 pounds with a small frame.

**Interviewer:** Excellent, so once you got here what were your expectations?

**Respondent:** I had none. I tried not to think about it. I talked to a couple of people who have been biking here so I knew I guess a little bit. Where I ride mostly technical, very weedy and rocky. And that's really what scares me the most, and I had been looking at jumps so people are like... I had friends who like a lot of jumps which I'm not so damn familiar with for that's still like for whatever reason scares me like



trails, jagged rocks sticking out at you and stuff. I just kind of blend with it.

**Interviewer:** So as of now, how was your experience?

**Respondent:** It's good. It's awesome. I'm having a great time. My coach is Lisa, I love her. I love Lisa. I know I love her she's so funny. She's good. We're like freaking out all the old men in our group, she's just always talking dirty jokes, she's hilarious. Frank was like oh my gosh you girls. It's so funny.

**Interviewer:** In terms of coaching, did you learn a lot?

**Respondent:** Yes definitely. I'm also very new so it feels like it's now to the point where I just need to like add all the things that I'm learning into one fluid motion. Cause I was like get corrected in many different parts and goings on especially in terms, stuff like that.

**Interviewer:** Is it in your opinion advantageous to have one coach in a period of time?

**Respondent:** I think it depends on the coach. I really like Lisa cause she's kind of, I felt like for whatever reason we've gotten along to the point where she's kind of...I don't know if all coaches would necessarily be able to do this. But she definitely is good at noticing individual strengths and individual weaknesses. And like working with you individually within the group. I believe that is very hard to do. So I would think normally they would probably want more than one coach cause obviously

people experience things differently. You might understand the way someone explains it and you wouldn't understand someone else does. But Lisa has picked up really well for me and I don't like having anyone else. The other coaches have done runs with me after...So I've been with other coaches too. It's good. I like it.

**Interviewer:** And about the overall experience. Food, accommodation...

**Respondent:** It's awesome. They have done a really good job. Very excited. The food is awesome. I thought for sure the food is going to be gross but I'm used to college food so I was like I'll be fine.

**Interviewer:** It's what you benchmarked it against...

**Respondent:** So I was like it'll be like cafeteria food. It wasn't. It's good. Fresh food.

**Interviewer:** But like every good service like a product, there's always room for improvement. Can you see from your own perspective something that you would like to add or anything probably you could do this and that and this could be solved in a different fashion?

**Respondent:** See, I feel like I'm so new. And everything's so like...

**Interviewer:** Don't hold that back.

**Respondent:** No, I'm just saying that the only things I had complaints personally I've only heard other people it's been about trail maintenance. I just don't know any better as far as...I think the way they split up groups this year was probably pretty good seems like, I know I heard someone telling me last year they had everybody just run down B line and I heard that was kind of a mess.

**Interviewer:** Still remember that one.

**Respondent:** I think this summer seems smoother. I don't know for sure. To me it appeared smooth the way they just did it by what we said and coaches within each other...I think it went more smoothly.

**Interviewer:** Anything else you would like to add?

**Respondent:** Maybe there could be more like other descriptions between beginner, intermediate and advanced. Maybe like more selections in between with more descriptions because I signed up for beginner obviously. But on the very first day, I was just so antsy to go on a trail. We're talking about how to stand up on your bike. Your brakes are very strong. They're definitely like beginner-beginner-never been on a bike and then like beginner intermediate. It just kind of sucked to have spent the whole first day like cause I was still a beginner and they've split it up accordingly since then. But I didn't, we didn't half of my group did not need to talk about how to stand on the bike. And we were all kind of frustrated for a little while cause we were like let's go bike.

**Interviewer:** So you would say it would be more advantageous if upfront we could introduce a rating system that's not...

**Respondent:** Beginner-never been on a bike. Beginner-Intermediate. I'm still a beginner but I know how to stand on a bike. Maybe an intermediate, maybe somewhere between an immediate expert cause I know there is that gray area. I've heard people say they've put themselves at expert. Cause I know on the description, going just off the description on the website, I would have put intermediate cause it's like I can go at fairly decent speed. Everyone said I can do small jumps. Well I can do that but not at Whistler. Everybody usually puts parenthesis at Whistler. It's big here.

**Interviewer:** So you would actually recommend that we be more specific like are you familiar with 2-foot jumps? Do you do 3-foot jumps? Are you comfortable with doing a gap jump? Can you do drop offs, 1 foot, 2 foot, 3 foot? Do you hit them often and...

**Respondent:** I think you would just get rid of that whole first day of...

**Interviewer:** Figuring out...

**Respondent:** ...cause that definitely I saw lots of people getting frustrated cause you're so anxious to get on the trail. You don't want to stand there. Well they just put all the beginners together. I think it's like 12 of us. Lisa and Ken, we did it as one big group. And then we all went down easy does it, which is awesome. And it was such a cluster of...it was awful and also we spent like an hour talking about your brakes which are very strong. Don't hit them too hard. You'll go over the handlebars. I was

like I want to go.

**Interviewer:** May I ask you a question? Did they at Day 1 was there communication what to expect? Did somebody like Andrew say listen, Day 1 is to get you familiar with the mountain, to get you down the mountain safely. It's a long week and just to set up your bike correctly and make sure you're all in the right group? No?

**Respondent:** No you get that kind of one-on-one from coaches when they saw people getting frustrated they'd be like look, we just need to figure things out. Calm down. Not to me. I was quiet about it but I was feeling the same way with the other people like c'mon, c'mon, let's go, let's go.

**Interviewer:** You had it inside steaming?

**Respondent:** Come on let's go. Much more like excited, not angry. They did it just kind of on their own there as needed. But it wasn't like understood I don't think by everybody cause on the first day you only feel like, I only have 6 days. But it's jam packed. By day 3, I'm like I have 6 days.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, it's a little bit different because on Day 1 you say, I only have 6 days. I paid for 6 days.

**Respondent:** Yeah and then you're like let's go let's go. By Day 3 you're like I'm going to take the morning off it really hurts.

**Interviewer:** Oh I'm only going to do the morning session this morning, oh really? On Day 1 it's like let's go up again. Okay but perhaps it should be our function to make you more aware of that so you know what your expectation should be. To tell you listen this is how we would like to deal...cause it's our responsibility to tell you about this. And not you go out and figure it out on your own. Good point. Anything else you would like to add?

**Respondent:** I've been really impressed. I love it, a blast. I've been super excited. I don't know if it's cause we're the adult group maybe want to hang out with us. But I've been super excited how around Andrew is and all the coaches like around all the time.

**Interviewer:** Accessible?

**Respondent:** Accessible, yeah, definitely. It's awesome. I didn't really expect that. But they'll be alright we're done see you. But like at 3:00 or 4:00 when everybody's supposed to go home, they don't necessarily go home, they're working out. Keep riding with you, which is nice.

**Interviewer:** Excellent. Thank you for that.

**Respondent:** You're welcome.

**Interviewer:** If there's anything else that pops up in your mind, or during the day you're like Oh, just stop by, I'm normally around here breakfast or after lunch or in

the evening and let me know. I'd appreciate that.

**Respondent:** Really. You're welcome.

## Appendix C

Coding Structure:

Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Attributes
<i>Hedonic Enjoyment</i>		Meeting and getting along with coaches
		Learning new skills
		Having fun (1 <sup>st</sup> time participants)
		Novelty/uniqueness of the camp
<i>Personal Progression</i>	Goal	Defining specific goals
		Mastering skills
		Additional (bonus) skills
	Challenge	Being challenged
		Group configuration
		Progression by challenge
	Coaching	Detail orientation
		Identifying individual strengths and weaknesses
		Guidance
		Continuity (Coach changes)
		Effective instructions
		Comparison with goals
	Peer Influence	Peer pressure
		Progress – learning from each other
	Self-Motivation	Persistency
		Eager to learn and progress
<i>Surreal Feeling</i>	Meeting with the stars	A dream comes true
	Getting inspired	Accomplishing the unthinkable
		Coaching quality
		Accessibility
		Trails and facilities
<i>Social Interaction</i>	Communitas	Sharing common ground
		Social events
		Pre-camp communication
		Belonging to their group
		Post-camp experience
		Influence on repurchase
<i>Efficiency</i>	Functional features	Flexibility
		Co-creation
	Communication	Cross channels
		Pre-camp
		Breaking the ice (1 <sup>st</sup> day)
	Effective services	Accommodation
		Lift Access
		Food



