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Boosting customized and personalized interactive livestreaming experiences. Is Amazon Explore competing or complementing the hospitality industry?

Structured Abstract

Purpose: Following the changes in consumer behavior in the hospitality industry due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Amazon launched “Explore”, an interactive livestreaming customized service that connects users with hosts worldwide, allowing them to discover a vast array of experiences from the comfort of their homes. This study assesses the effects of Explore on the hospitality and tourism industries.

Methodology: An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted. Data was collected from 18 expert interviews and 292 online reviews on Explore.

Findings: The findings indicate that the pandemic has altered consumer behavior when it comes to experience-related venues. Within that shift, Explore was shown to have reinvented the travel industry. The major three themes extracted revolved around the following: (1) *replica of real-life touristic experiences* (having the experience as if consumers were physically present), (2) *experience-bound versus output-oriented customers* (those who want to explore the real experience by being physically present versus those who seek to discover a certain culture or acquire a new skill even virtually), and (3) *post-virtual experience* (effects on the hospitality industry).

Originality: The study puts forth the co-competition that could emanate from the inter-relationship between the Amazon Explore platform and the hospitality industry if the two were to cooperate even beyond the context of global pandemics. Indeed, Explore has gained awareness and trial and could be a sustainable ongoing business especially among those with financial and other types of limitations that could hinder their travelling propensity.

INTRODUCTION

Up until 2019, the rate of advancement in technologies used in most sectors seemed very promising. Therefore, businesses with successful marketing, consumer behavior analysis, and constant monitoring of market trends and demand patterns seemed more equipped to face sudden changes and challenges. However, the fast spread of Covid-19 proved otherwise. Indeed, all measures appeared rather ineffective when the unforeseen pandemic started its worldwide disruption (Pedersen *et al.*, 2020). Most organizations usually have contingency plans to face unexpected market changes, but it is unlikely that any firm, business owner, or marketer, forecasted complete lockdowns (Saab *et al.*, 2021). While consumers quarantined, businesses closed their doors and had to find creative ways to keep their activities running while worldwide economies crumbled. Historically, the hospitality industry has always been the first one to take the hit during any crisis. During the outbreak of Covid-19, with governments, societies, and enterprises rushing to adapt to a new reality and lifestyle imposed by the pandemic, the first victim of the crisis was not any different (Abosedra *et al.*, 2021). Besides, the effect of Covid-19, at least economically, proved to be the most destructive one in modern history (Hall *et al.* 2020).

According to Rivera (2020), the DNA of the hospitality industry was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic which increased the need to employ interactive and smart services across the industry (Hao *et al.*, 2020; Shahzad *et al.*, 2022). The changes in consumer demand trends were indeed the underlying drivers of this digital transformation. For instance, customers' preferences have shifted towards a contactless service that is backed by digital technologies (Lythreathis *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, many industries rushed their digitization processes in order to gain a competitive edge post-pandemic (Chaker *et al.*, 2022). Concurrently, the demand for customized experiences had been increasing in the past decade at the expense of mass tourism, as consumers now expect personalized solutions that match their own needs (Zsarnoczky, 2018). Therefore, it is highly important for hospitality businesses to comprehend how the pandemic has shifted the consumption behaviors of people (Li *et al.*, 2021).

Amazon is known for its innovative technologies and expenditure in fast growing sectors. It regularly introduces unprecedented technological tools to further widen its diversified consumer base (Ramadan *et al.*, 2019). In September 2020, it launched "Amazon Explore", an interactive livestreaming customized service connecting customer with hosts worldwide, enabling them to explore anything from lessons to landmarks while sitting at home. It is considered as a fully personalized experience due to its one-on-one service with the guiding host. Accordingly, every host has a plan prepared for the session; users are free to customize it in any way they desire; changing the direction of the tour, skipping a part of the tutorial, and so on.

Despite Explore being a promising service for customers, its ensuing effects on the hospitality industry are yet to be fully assessed. Indeed, there is a dire need for the hospitality sector to fully understand the implications of such personalized interactive livestreaming experiences on the industry; in other words, whether Explore would be competing or complementing hospitality services. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no prior research has studied the personalized virtual experience provided by this new virtual service. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the effects of such a technological disruption on the hospitality industry, as well as the role of Explore in backing or substituting the offerings of this sector. The implications on the industry as a whole, as well as on such untraditional new entrants to that sector, are proposed and discussed from a growth and profitability sharing perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customized and personalized experiences

The tourism industry faced a significant crisis as a result of its incapability to recognize and adjust to the new requirements of the very conscious and experienced market of the 21st century. The customization of a customer's experience can highly affect their behavior post-encounter, whereby the customer's satisfaction will increase leading to customer trust and loyalty. When organizations put a greater focus on the customer rather than on the service, they move from a goods-dominant method to a service-dominant approach, whereby value is no longer developed by the company, nor is it created by the customers: they now co-create it together. To overcome the unexpected consequences of the pandemic crisis, the service-dominant (S-D) logic could be a key dynamic approach, whereby different resources are put together to continuously co-create value, and accordingly enhance the well-being of recipients (Tommasetti *et al.*, 2017; Itani *et al.*, 2021; Miftah and Hermawan, 2021). The interaction between the different parties generate a collaborative and interactive process of co-creation where firms deliver a value proposition and

customers perceive its service experience and derive the value-in-use (Plé and Cáceres, 2010). Companies can engage consumers in co-creation by asking the latter to participate in either creating a new product, or being part of the service delivery or recovery (Kumar and Stuart, 2016).

Likewise, the concept of prosumerism has emerged to highlight the involvement of consumers in the value creation (Tapscott and Williams, 2008), whereby they engage in producing goods, services or experiences for their own use or satisfaction, rather than for sale or exchange (Chandler and Chen, 2015; Brown *et al.*, 2020). Prosumers take part in the creation and production process rooted in the service experience to co-create value through the customization and personalization of offerings (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

In parallel, the servuction model (service-production) relates to the creation of a memorable experience that is governed by the involvement of the consumer in the co-production of the service. Indeed, the service experience is influenced by the effect of multiple factors including the servicescape, service providers, other consumers, and invisible organizations and systems (Pegu *et al.*, 2019). The servuction model emphasizes that the service occurs and is co-produced through the process of various interactions by the customer (Grönroos, 2012). Consequently, marketing is converted from a “market to” notion, where tourists were pointed and captured, to a “market with”, whereby the setting and the tourists are co-partners in the whole marketing process (Cova and Salle, 2008, p. 271).

Reshaping a service based on customized recommendations are key to the road of customer satisfaction (Shen and Ball, 2009). Most service firms apply personalization in live encounters and use information technology systems in order to personalize their offerings to build long-term relationships with their customers (Ramadan *et al.*, 2021b; Ansari and Mela, 2003). Shen and Ball (2009) distinguished between two types of personalization: while the first type is applied by service representatives, the second is done through information technologies.

Personalization is achieved by the customization of a service to a specific customer through the adjustable behavior of the representatives and imbeds two different dimensions: *interpersonal behavior* and *adaptive service offering* (Gwinner *et al.*, 2005). In the first dimension, employees change their verbal and non-verbal communication upon the interactive context of the service, by calling customers by their first name, or opening side talks to build further relationships (Bettencourt and Gwinner, 1996). In the second case, employees personalize the service for customers by presenting different options tailored to their needs (Gwinner *et al.*, 2005). In both scenarios, marketers are better equipped to connect with potential customers, drive more conversions, and increase loyalty levels.

Personalization is also able to alter consumers' attitude and behavior and decrease the costs of acquisition, while raising the company's revenues and marketing efficacy (Ariker *et al.*, 2015). Whenever consumers start making use of personalized and customized services, the personalization-privacy paradox might arise (Baek, 2014). This means that consumers will have to choose between the benefits they get out of personalization and the associated privacy risks (Pappas, 2018). In such situations, emotions, trust, and prior purchasing experiences are the main factors affecting consumers' behavioral intent (Lee and Rha, 2016). Privacy and trust factors play a major role in online services, especially in personalized and customized ones (Mahdi *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, the lack of trust leads to hesitance in consumers' behavior towards electronic commerce, whereby online customers can have serious concerns about security, privacy, technology risk and integrity (Hanell *et al.*, 2019). The intensity of the concerns shapes the trust of online customers during electronic transactions (Connolly and Bannister, 2007). In fact, building trust in e-commerce can lead to online transaction intention, customer retention and e-

loyalty, lower risk perception of online customers, satisfaction, and positive perception about sellers (Soleimani, 2021). Only with trust, people could overcome the risks of web-based interactions such as filling in personal information or making a purchase. Thus, it is crucial for e-vendors to foster trust to be able to convert a potential customer from a silent observer to a person who will perform an action.

The conversion process follows the marketing funnel, which is composed of four stages namely awareness, consideration, purchase, and satisfaction that tracks the decision-making steps taken by the customers when making a purchase (De Haan *et al.*, 2016). It is based on the customer journey stages whereby companies try to influence consumers' decision and buying intention (Farah *et al.*, 2019; Farah *et al.*, 2022). At the awareness stage, consumers discover a brand's existence while at the consideration they contemplate how the product/service might be satisfying their need. Following effective calls to actions by the brand, customers move into the purchase stage and then into the final post-purchase evaluation of the journey (Colicev *et al.*, 2019).

Research has proven that customizing the demonstration that is delivered to each consumer depending on their unique needs and wants will increase the effectiveness of the salespeople working with them (Weitz *et al.*, 1986). In addition, the presence of enough product information will highly increase the confidence of the consumer when buying online, as consumers would have taken control of their own choice processes (King and Hill, 1997). As for virtual experiences, Murray (1991) advances that whenever purchase risks are high, consumers would desire more direct experiences with the product. Once consumers begin to realize the stimulated or direct experiences that are provided by virtual experiences, their perceived purchase risks will automatically decrease (Farah *et al.*, 2019); in other words, the virtual experience that a customer could enjoy would help alleviate the perception of risk associated with the purchase of the actual physical experience as the user would have gotten a taste of what may be experienced later, albeit at a much lower financial cost.

Virtual and Online Experiences

Travelers nowadays are shifting from buying consumer products to buying experiences, searching for personalized and streamlined services. Covid-19 has resulted in a drastic shift in consumer needs and preferences: demand for virtual tours and experiences has increased significantly. Consequently, providing consumers with distinctive travel experiences that capture their attention became a must. This is supported by an emerging experience economy where more participation and involvement of both customers and service providers is growing in the service delivery operation (Bhati, 2014).

According to Pine and Gilmore (2011), experience economy is the last stage of an economic development that has advanced through the levels of commodities, goods, and services economies. Indeed, consumers desire personalized, unique and customized experiences, thus firms and businesses should respond to these wants and desires by delivering unforgettable experiences. Therefore, the focus is moving from a service economy (offering and selling services) to an experience economy (Song *et al.*, 2015), whereby consumers pursue memories in the products and services offered; these memories take the form of a product, called "experience" (Schmitt, 1999). The tourism experience is divided into four realms called the "4Es": *educational, entertainment, escape, and esthetics* (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). These realms of the experience economy are considered as the base of the experiential model (Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012). In educational experiences, the customers immerse in the events by actively participating; in entertainment experiences, customers passively participate and absorb all the events with their senses. An

escapist experience is explained to be the opposite of an entertaining one because it requires complete immersion and active involvement in the events taking place. Finally, in esthetic experiences, users are soaked up in the environment but they do not get involved in it.

A tourism experience that becomes a memorable one is defined as “a tourism experience remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim *et al.*, 2012, p.2). A memorable tourism experience (MTE) is based on the past memory, considered as a valuable and influential source of information on the tourist decision-making process when thinking to revisit a certain destination (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2013). The importance of past memory and experience is based on its information reliability, its influence on future behaviors and intentions, and motivation to revisit according to tourists past experiences (Hoch and Deighton, 1989). A MTE involves activities, feeling and thoughts felt by tourists at a particular destination. To assess a tourist experience, the four realms of experience is considered a valid way of evaluation (Kim *et al.*, 2012).

Innovation technology in the tourism industry helps in fulfilling the increasing demand for memorable and unique tourist experiences (Yovcheva *et al.*, 2013). Digital platforms act as a source of data and facilitate the sharing of travel experiences (Hjalager and Jensen, 2012). While physical tourism was halted by the global pandemic, e-Tourism on the hand has grown tremendously. Past and prospective tourists have been reminiscing over their previous trips and travels on their different social media platforms by sharing their vacation pictures and contemplating about future destinations and tours (Gretzel *et al.*, 2020). In the process of product development, hospitality and tourism industries are utilizing interactive means to help potential customers visualize a new hotel (Bogicevic *et al.*, 2021).

Amidst Covid-19, the necessity of technological solutions has been highly amplified, encouraging the development of e-tourism (O'Connor and Assaker, 2021). In that context, solutions were to be proposed in order to monitor and serve the shifting consumer needs such as late reservations, risk perception, and the demand for personalized and exceptional packages (Gretzel *et al.*, 2020). The recommended social distancing measure to curb Covid-19 spread resulted in people creating a new look for the tourism, such as virtual reality (VR) based tours. In fact, VR in tourism is now used to create a virtual environment by adopting a 360-degree content captured in real life, enabling online and virtual touristic experiences (Beck *et al.*, 2019). The information and experience provided by virtual tours can surpass those of traditional media, such as static images and 2D videos (Baek *et al.*, 2020). With virtual tours, tourists can decide and plan their trip more effectively, such as selecting the right honeymoon package based on a complete virtual tour including hotel stay and location landmarks (Lo and Cheng, 2020). Consumers can effortlessly navigate the selected location (Wei, 2019) and gain information in a better way, which will create a sense of telepresence. Telepresence means being in a certain place psychologically and not physically, affecting positively a person's attitude and willingness to visit the real destination (Baek *et al.*, 2020).

Online touristic experiences are further augmented by customers' reviews on platforms enabling such interactions (Assaker *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, interactivity features were found to facilitate engagement between customers and the used platform, which affects users' response (Jiang and Benbasat, 2007). This is where the user-generated content (UGC) can play an important role as it is equivalent to the e-WOM (word-of-mouth) marketing, whereby individuals who have previously experienced a certain product or service can share their occurrence, opinion, and beliefs with a group of people who are interested in knowing more about it (Ahuja *et al.*, 2007). UGC translates the user's personal experience, recommendations, knowledge, opinion and information

about a certain product or service (Oum and Han, 2011). Users attitude and trust towards UGC are positively linked to consumers' behavioral intentions during the decision-making process as well as their actual purchasing behavior following these online contents (Daugherty *et al.*, 2008; Bae and Lee, 2011).

Digital platforms and social media create opportunities to form virtual communities and socialize by generating and sharing content of interest (Chung and Koo, 2015; Ramadan, 2023): consumers identify themselves with certain groups through self-segmentation based on the groups' characteristics, common interest, attitudes and lifestyle (Canhoto *et al.*, 2013). Such distinctive groups are based on consumers' preferences, characteristics, desires and common motivations. The members of the group translate a sense of solidarity and contribute to this virtual community by their eWOM based on professional knowledge and information sharing, influencing their purchase intentions and decisions (Tsao and Hsieh, 2015).

Online sociability within virtual communities also simplify the interconnection between customers (Zhang *et al.*, 2014; Ginzarly and Teller, 2020). The sociability feature is believed to be associated with relationships between two people or more, trust, and community cohesion (Kreijns *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, the perceived personalization, that relates to customers' discernment about the versatility of the platform to meet their wants and needs, focuses on giving online customers with individualized content subject to their unique preferences, needs, profiles, and previous interactions (Dziewanowska, 2015; Ramadan and Kanso, 2023).

In traditional tourism experiences, successful and delightful visiting experiences are believed to be highly affected by the tour guide, hence the overall quality of a tour depends on his/her interpretation (Brito, 2012), defined as a learning activity that disseminates meanings and relations by using real objects in a direct experience rather than only stating facts (Andraz, 2015). In other words, interpretation is not simply about providing tourists with information about the destination that they can easily get from any source, but it is rather about enlightening them with natural and cultural understanding of the visited place. From an online context, virtual touristic experiences are likely to be shaped by similar factors in addition to the customers' personalization expectations. Indeed, the key factor to improve service quality in the tourism sector is innovation (Itani and Hollebeek, 2021) often allowed by the ever-expanding digital tools which enhance customer engagement and facilitate personalization (Hasni *et al.*, 2021).

The Amazon Explore Experience

Technology has been drastically developing during the last couple of decades (Farah and Ramadan, 2017), and businesses are now resorting to new technological inventions to survive the global pandemic and retain their customers. Such inventions include virtual tours, defined as a series of videos or pictures followed by text and audio descriptions representing a reproduction of a certain place (El-Said and Aziz, 2021). Amazon for instance, prioritizes the delivery of a distinctive experience to its customers by constantly acquiring technological innovations that proved to be a source of success to the company (Yunis *et al.*, 2018; Ramadan, 2021; Ramadan *et al.*, 2021a).

At the end of 2019, the unexpected spread of Covid-19 introduced new uncertainties and challenges to different industries (Ramadan *et al.*, 2023). This was highly apparent in the tourism and hospitality industry (Hao *et al.*, 2020), which was historically dependent on human mobility and interactivity, and is now highly affected by the global pandemic (Itani and Hollebeek, 2021). Museums are one example of touristic establishments who have adopted virtual tours. However, Amazon successfully grasped its chances in this sector by launching in September 2020, "Amazon

Explore” that offers consumers a completely new online touristic experience. The latter uses its own live-streaming tools that allow people to book virtual tours with guides. These include one-on-one sessions or tours and shopping experiences from any place in the world with the ability to ship purchases to the required destination. Due to the Covid-19 lockdowns, people had to cancel their travel plans; however, Explore offered individuals the chance to still discover the world, learn new skills and even shop safely.

Each online experience is conducted via a two-way audio and one-way video call, so that the user can hear and see the host while asking questions and guiding the session as they see fit (McMahon, 2020). The idea behind the two-way audio is to initiate a sense of presence for the user, so that the experience does not end up a passive participation behind a screen. Consequently, the online user is encouraged to be active the whole session, by asking questions, choosing directions for the tour, shopping, etc. These online experiences are all directed and led by hosts who are well-trained and supported by Amazon (Amazon, 2020). Currently, Amazon offers more than 175 experiences featuring guides, chefs, artisans, stylists and show owners as a way to entice a more intimate way for customers to purchase on the e-commerce platform. Prices start from as low as US\$10 up to US\$200 with session ranging from 35 minutes to an hour.

Other businesses such as Expedia Inc., the online travel agency and OnZoom, the extension of Zoom’s communications platform are also offering similar services to Explore. Expedia introduced the “Travel from Home” online tours to fulfill the Singaporeans’ need to travel during lockdowns (Koumelis, 2020). Expedia’s new service features different virtual experiences and activities organized by its local expert partners. According to Expedia’s Vacation Deprivation Study (2019), mental health and other benefits of travel can be reaped without a physical presence. On the other hand, Zoom, that serves as a video communications enterprise, introduced a new solution for paid Zoom services called OnZoom, where users can generate and host events like stand-up shows, fitness classes, travel tours and music lessons on the Zoom Meetings platform (Swerdlow, 2020). Nonetheless, the Amazon experience is much more immersive as it offers the opportunity for deeper and richer experiences and allows customers to buy products seen during the live streaming from the destination that is being virtually visited. These will be directly charged to the personal accounts of the Amazon customer.

METHODOLOGY

This study intends to investigate the role of Explore in supporting or disrupting the hospitality and tourism industries. Accordingly, the key research questions tackled in this research are as follows:

RQ₁: How can customized and personalized interactive livestreaming experiences advance the hospitality industry?

RQ₂: Does Amazon Explore compete or rather complement the hospitality industry?

Accordingly, and given the exploratory nature of this research work, a qualitative approach was adopted to gain related insights, using expert interviews and online reviews extracted from the U.S. Amazon Explore website. Qualitative studies are appropriate for deepening our understanding about new forms experiences as well as fields that are still largely under researched (Stebbins, 2001; Sarantakos, 2005; Creswell, 2009). Given that a thorough theoretical knowledge on customized and personalized interactive livestreaming experiences is scant, further exploratory

research is essential (Creswell, 1994) to develop an initial understanding of this new service in the hospitality industry.

The first source of data came from interviews that were conducted during the second quarter of the year 2021 with professionals from the hospitality and travel and touring sectors. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that sparked in-depth discussions with 18 experts in the field (see table 1). Interviewees were selected based on non-probability purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The sampling number was determined based on data saturation (Guest *et al.*, 2006; Baker *et al.*, 2012). Data saturation was attained by the 15th interview, nevertheless, the fieldwork was extended to three additional interviews so as to verify that no extra insight can be generated (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1995). The interviews started by asking about the experts' own experience followed by general questions on the effect of Covid-19 on the tourism industry and consumers' digital experiences. The interviewees were then asked about their assessment of the virtual and online tourism experiences, the personalized and customized offered services, alongside their advantages and disadvantages for both consumers and companies. The experts interviewed had 9 years of experience on average in their respective fields. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through NVIVO 12 that allows for the extraction of emerging themes.

Insert here: Table 1: Respondents' Demographics

Customers' reviews related to Amazon Explore were the second source of data: a total of 292 reviews were manually retrieved from the US website from Amazon (from its launch in September 2020 to March 2021). The reviews that were collected were methodically investigated. All in all, nine distinctive themes were extracted from the reviews, of which 3 were common to the themes extracted from the elite interviews. The themes extracted facilitated the coding of the data. Recursive abstraction was the method used to analyze all the data collected. The dominating theme of the analyzed reviews related to the knowledge and expertise of the professionals who were leading the Explore session. Inductive thematic analysis was utilized to analyze data collected through the elite interviews and the online reviews. The latter is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79). This technique is based on the identification of themes through the iterative processing of the qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998; Higgs, 2001; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Such an analysis approach is relevant when it comes to building inductive theories based on thick qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Themes from online reviews and interviews transcripts were triangulated and cross-checked by two researchers who coded the data individually leading to higher validity (Altheide and Johnson, 1994; Bloor, 1997; Creswell and Miller, 2000; Jonsen and Jehn, 2009). The researchers then verified together the findings, reaching 92% inter-coder reliability for reviews and 86% for transcribed data. The themes were discussed between the researchers and reconciled (Long and Godfrey, 2004).

FINDINGS

In total nine themes were extracted, from which three were common to both sets of data (experts' interview and online reviews), namely: (1) *replica of real-life touristic experiences*, (2)

experience-bound versus output-oriented customers, (3) post-virtual experience effect. Online reviews included six other general themes related to the basic functionality of the Amazon Explore website. These came as follows: (1) *quality of sound*, (2) *quality of image*, (3) *aesthetics of the site*, (4) *language*, (5) *ease of use*, and (6) *the number of available packages*. As this study focuses on the genuine, customized and personalized experiences offered by such a livestreaming platform, these 6 themes related solely to the functionality of the website were disregarded in the context of this research. Accordingly, the following section will be discussing the three main themes that were common to the experts' interviews and the online reviews, and which revolved around real-life tailored touristic experiences.

1. Replica of real-life touristic experiences

Through their reviews, customers expressed an overall positive feedback with regards to the level of interaction and sensory experience they enjoyed virtually. Nonetheless, professionals in the traditional (i.e. non-virtual) hospitality sector were dubious about this virtual service. Indeed, they reiterated the likely shortcomings that could emanate from the lack of human interaction and involvement, and which is likely to lead to a poorer virtual sensory experience. Indeed, consumers were describing the experience as if they were physically present. They were able to express all what they experienced using their senses. On the other hand, the industry professionals opposed customers' opinions as there would be a diminished sensory experience. For example, in the case of wine tasting, and to remedy for the shortcoming of a virtual experience, the sommelier can advise customers about the featured wine brands so that they can buy them beforehand in order for them to experience the same presented wine brands.

“My tour was during nightfall; it was amazing to see the city lights reflecting in the canals and water below. Tina ended the tour at a bridge where lovers write on a lock, and lock it to the bridge rails. It just so happened my host had a lock and wrote a special message for me and locked it forever to the bridge.” (Online customer review)

“It was just after 7:00 in the morning in Ljubljana, and as the daylight grew, people were waking up and beginning to walk the old streets that were decorated with white Christmas lights. While we asked questions and took photos, we saw vendors setting up their Saturday market stalls. This background activity enhanced the feeling that we were there.” (Online customer review)

“Virtual livestreaming of experiences lack the richness of interactions with travelers unlike the real face-to-face encounters that allow engagement and sensory stimulation” (Tour guide, 7 years of experience)

A consumer who books an Explore experience could be looking for human interaction, meeting new people and/or places virtually, acquiring a new skill, learning about the history of a cultural landmark, etc. Therefore, each consumer has a unique need or desire behind booking such an experience. Indeed, the biggest propensity to look for and try new experiences is driven by sentiments and pleasure-seeking factors. As defined by Grabenhorst and Rolls (2011), pleasure is an emotional state created by the fulfillment of a stimuli. Pleasure should be assessed as an experience that includes emotions, motivation, inspiration, desire, memory and experience

(Moccia *et al.*, 2018). In the case of Explore, the user's main intention behind booking an experience is driven by sentiments according to the findings.

Consumers who have tried Explore were highly delighted with the interaction they had with the professionals who were leading the whole virtual experience. They all commented on how the professionals perfectly balanced the time between spontaneous engagement (getting to know their interests, favorite spots...) and their various queries (related to history, culture, tools...). In contrast, experts confirmed that real-time interaction is major in experiences. According to customers, the platform consistently allowed for an active two-way conversation with the professional guiding the various sessions.

“Our guide was outstanding. She was knowledgeable, welcoming, [...] She led the tour with a perfect balance between teaching and leaving room for questions - a perfect ambassador for Sensoji Temple.” (Online customer review)

“A major factor that plays a crucial role in the virtual experiences is the human interaction, because experiences are all about real-time interaction with the one giving the session (chef, tour guide...), and with the other people too.” (Co-founder and managing director of a tour agency, 10 years of experience)

The success of virtual experiences is highly dependent on the professional people leading the sessions. Indeed, the guide should adapt to the different needs and wants of consumers paying for such personalized experiences. Interestingly, most of the customer reviews highly praised the knowledge and friendliness of the guides in Explore. The various experiences including the virtual guided tours were praised for their high engagement level, characterized by an active interaction between the guides and the customers. Many users felt that they are living the experience with a companion. Moreover, most users were positively surprised by the expertise of their hosts and their ability to answer any query.

“Our guide, Daniel, was outstanding. He engaged all members of our family, regardless of age. He was fun and very knowledgeable! We highly recommend this family-friendly experience.” (Online customer review)

“This was an amazing experience! I have been to Tokyo several times over the last few years, and I miss it. While I have personally been to Sensoji Temple, I did not know much about its history. My host did an amazing job walking around and explaining things. He made it interactive, even helped me pick a fortune and showed me some of the lesser-known areas around the temple grounds. I will be doing another one of these very soon.” (Online customer review)

Moreover, users were satisfied with the fact that their experiences were fully personalized. In fact, customers were the ones choosing which way to go during the tour, which street to pass through, which temple or animal to get more detailed information on. Therefore, the guides behind the Explore experiences made sure to adjust their sessions upon the different wants and interests of each customer. Each session, regardless if it is the same experience and with the same or different host, is customized to meet the distinctive desires of each person. The personalization present in the Explore is the one applied by the service representative who in this case is the

maestro of the experience (e.g. guide, chef, baker...). The findings revealed that the two personalization dimensions used by guides are: interpersonal behavior and adaptive service offering. In the interpersonal behavior, the guide calls the users by their first names, jokes with them, remembers their interests if they book with him/her again, and builds relationships with them. On the other hand, the adaptive service offering is highly applied in Explore by asking for the users' preferences and interests, while adjusting the session based on their choices.

“My host Nene is very friendly and knowledgeable. In addition to introducing the history and architecture of Sensoji, Nene incorporated the culture in Spirited Away in my tour, once she learned that I love that movie. She also patiently answered all my questions. It is a very interactive way to learn a new place and culture. It is a great experience before I have a chance to visit Japan in person.” (Online customer review)

“Kei is the most engaging and fun host imaginable!! He even remembered our family from our previous tour and made us a special welcoming sign. He gave us a very interesting history of the Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines and answered all of our questions. Highly recommended!!” (Online customer review)

2. Experience-bound versus output-oriented customers

Results revealed a bi-typology of two types of users interested in reserving an Explore experience: experience-oriented or output-oriented customers. Experience-oriented users are typically those who look for the experience itself; they prefer to explore the real experience by being physically present in order to be able to smell the different aromas, taste the exact same flavors, and see things through their own eyes. In contrast, output-oriented consumers have set goals behind the experience they seek: they yearn to a large extent to discover new cultures and countries' history or to learn additional skills. Therefore, these two types of customers have different goals from such experiences.

“Maybe we can categorize customers into two segments: experience-oriented versus output-oriented based on their goals when choosing a touristic experience. The former group cherishes fun experiential moments, while the latter focuses on a particular learning outcome.” (Managing director of a tourism agency, 12 years of experience)

“I had Federico as a guide, and he was such much fun to watch! He was very entertaining and extremely knowledgeable. He is a great storyteller and I was able to get some beautiful shots of buildings and statues. I love going on tours like these because you can learn so much about the area and the guides will answer any questions you have.” (Online customer review)

According to the interviewed experts, experience-oriented customers are not a good target for Explore to focus on. Experts believe that most of Explore's customers would be output-oriented, and accordingly eager to know about different cultural landmarks or to learn a new skill from an expert. Therefore, this customer segment would probably yearn to explore something that they are curious to know more about. Indeed, the industry experts assumed that amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and the recurrent lockdowns, people would resort to such virtual experiences. It is believed that once the restrictions are removed, these experience-oriented customers could still

seek online livestreaming experiences at the pre-purchase stage before actually visiting the destination physically. The experts expect that the engagement level with the maestro of the experience and the surrounding would be much more valuable in person for such customers especially when complemented with the livestreaming service that allowed them to have a pre-taste of the experience.

“For customers who seek the experience and everything that comes with it, I don't think they would really like Explore. But for those who care more about the output of the whole experience, like the additional information and knowledge they would get from it, then this might be a very convenient service.” (Managing director of a tour agency, 12 years of experience)

“People who care more about the experience would definitely not be very good candidates for the virtual experiences or destinations. These customers want to get the flavor of the real experience. However, customers who want to learn about other cultures or new skills they would be less influenced by the experience itself if done virtually.” (Owner of a travel agency, 15 years of experience)

“Amazon Explore presents an amazing opportunity for travel agencies as they act as a teaser of the full experience which would be expected to have a positive spillover on our business.” (Manager of an online travel agency, 7 years of experience)

3. Post-virtual experience effects

Findings revealed that Explore could be an exciting means for promoting various destinations, even though the livestreaming service sparked a debate about whether it could become a substitute for physical tourism. Nonetheless, virtual travel was perceived as allowing users to learn about landmarks and the various attractions of a country they may not have visited otherwise. In fact, most online reviews showed customers' eagerness to visit the destination in person at the end of the virtual visit. Explore could help the various players in the hospitality sector entice users to book for an actual visit of the discovered destination following their positive livestreamed experience. Accordingly, Explore has a positive effect on the promotion of the real destination, whereby users can become more interested of the experience they could expect.

“At first we were concerned Explore would supersede physical experiences that the hospitality industry provides. Nonetheless, to our surprise we started witnessing greater interest in tours and events post livestreaming.” (Event planner, 5 years of experience)

“GREAT use of half an hour. Price was great for the amount that they show you and you learn about the culture and history. Cannot wait to actually visit there and see all of these in person. Totally recommend it!” (Online customer review)

“Our host took the time to explain the "why" behind everything we were seeing, from architectural features to purification rituals to the symbols and writing that helped us put it all into the appropriate context. We are grateful to have had this opportunity to see such a meaningful and historic place and can't wait to learn more about Japan - and visit in person once it is safe!” (Online customer review)

Most customers were excitedly sharing in their online reviews that they cannot wait to physically visit the place that they virtually toured with Explore. Hence, if the whole booking process is also done through Explore as a result of the livestreaming experience, then it might be another source of profit for both Amazon and the hospitality industry.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

From a scholarly perspective, this study fills a sizeable gap in the limited literature related to the introduction of customized and personalized virtual experiences in the hospitality industry. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this study is the first that examines Amazon's new experiential service, Explore, and the influence it has on the hospitality industry, the demand shifts, and the altered consumer behaviors in this sector. The findings enhanced the current understanding pertaining to virtual touristic experiences and the complementary versus competitive stance that such platforms have vis-à-vis the hospitality industry. This study also highlighted the technological capabilities used in the design of Explore to provide synchronous and personalized experiences. Customers praised this neo experience for providing them with a quasi-real "trip" from the comfort of their own homes. While Explore sparked a debate among industry professionals who saw it as a replacement rather than a long-term opportunity, this study has revealed that Explore is reinventing the tourism industry. In addition to the literature on MTE (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2013), this study has shown how Explore can redefine consumers' memorable tourism experience across the customer journey. Indeed, the findings revealed that such technological tools could complement the overall customer experience throughout the different stages of the funnel generating more valuable UGC and e-WOM (Ahuja *et al.*, 2007; Tsao and Hsieh, 2015) that would have a collective positive impact on the overall value chain of the hospitality industry.

From a managerial perspective, the Covid-19 pandemic appeared as a catalyst for the development and faster acceptance of touristic livestreaming services such as Explore. Under that context, Amazon's entry into the hospitality sector could allow its revenues to be increased through the following two strategies: 1) the potential sales conversion of customers from interactive and highly customized livestreaming experiences into future actual/physical touristic experiences, and 2) the potential enlargement of sales on Amazon's e-commerce platform through the recommendation made by the guide during the virtual experience (see figure 1). Indeed, Amazon could further increase its overall revenues from such a service by making a one-click button that allows the user to order the ingredients needed for his/her cooking session through Amazon Fresh. The above strategies are expected to have sizeable implications on the industry as a whole given: (1) the change in the competitive scenario through new entrants (e.g. Explore for e-commerce, Alibaba for technological hotels), and (2) the proximity marketing and new opportunities for promotion and sale in the places that customers are virtually visited.

Insert here: Figure 1: Amazon Explore and the hospitality industry: A complementary relationship

Amazon could also complement the hospitality industry by giving people the chance to virtually tour and check the place, country, hotel, and cultural landmark they are willing to travel

to before making their final bookings. Explore could propose a new feature allowing users to check hotels and getaways in the area they are virtually touring for future potential travelling.

While consumers typically perceive booking online in a hospitality venue to be a risky decision (Guttentag *et al.*, 2018), this perceived risk can be decreased if such businesses collaborate with Explore livestreaming customized service. Furthermore, the feature of virtually touring different hotels could help a faster recovery of the hospitality industry post-Covid-19. Indeed, if users were able to explore in details the hotel that they would like to book in along with its various services and amenities, then Explore would be indirectly promoting it. Per se, Amazon would be complementing the hospitality industry rather than competing with it.

Moreover, Amazon could expand its services by allowing customers to directly book in places such as museums, hotels, resorts and other hospitality businesses through its platform. As such, established hospitality players could consider partnering up with Explore as it could indirectly be promoting their businesses, and hence helping them increase their customer base. Conversely, the hospitality industry could also promote Amazon Explore as a way for customers to extend their lived physical experiences with their families and friends back home. As such, customers will be going through a non-linear experience, whereby the virtual and physical trips would be integrated together, accordingly extending the monetization potential and reach of omnipresent touristic destinations.

While hospitality businesses offer live and in-person experiences and Explore provides virtual ones, each of these players has its own peculiarities, accompanied by different advantages and disadvantages. If the advantages of both are combined, then this could reinvent the tourism and hospitality industry, ultimately benefitting both constituents as one would complement and fill the other's shortfalls. Indeed, according to Molchanova (2014), no hospitality business will be able to keep up with the market competition if it does not adapt to the modern information technology. An example of such an adaptation that is expected to maximize users' experience is the checking of a place virtually and subsequently booking it on a same platform. Accordingly, instead of having Explore and the various players in the hospitality industry act as rivals, they could combine their services and strengths for a new post-pandemic era under a co-competition-based neo-tourism experience. These potential service extensions could be further developed in the near future with the advent of the Metaverse, whereby users would be able to have a deeper sense of the destinations they yearn for through a more immersive experience that would stimulate their various senses. Indeed, it is expected that with the growing interest in virtual worlds and their fast development, customers, especially tech savvy ones, would be more likely to use various disruptive innovations for touristic and experiential purposes.

In sum, the findings of this study showed that the pandemic has drastically changed the way consumers find, evaluate and undergo experiences in the tourism industry. The research argued that Explore is considered as a replication of the real-life experience that consumers can undergo from the comfort of their home. Users were highly delighted with the real-time experience that they went through with an expert on Explore. Indeed, they were contented with the level of interaction that they were able to enjoy as well as the overall quasi-sensory experience they encountered. The study put forth the co-competition that could emanate from the inter-relationship between the Explore platform and the hospitality industry if the two were to cooperate. Indeed, this co-competition can result in mutually beneficial and profitable outcomes for both Amazon and worldwide hospitality businesses beyond the context of global pandemics. Indeed, Explore has gained awareness and trial and could be a sustainable ongoing business especially among those with financial and other types of limitations that could hinder their travelling propensity.

Even though the literature related to Amazon Explore is still inexistent, this research is yet not without limitations due to exploratory nature, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, Explore is currently still limited to Prime users residing in specific western countries (specifically North America). Future research could adopt an empirical approach to test potential sales conversions of customers that were referred by Explore. Research could also further investigate the positive effect that Explore could have on the promotion of touristic destination for actual visits. When the Explore service would be available for a wider target segment in different parts of the world, future research could also study whether the same effect would be replicated.

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