

High Tech for High Touch Experiences: A Case Study from the Hospitality Industry

Barbara Neuhofer,
Dimitrios Buhalis, and
Adele Ladkin

eTourismLab
Bournemouth University, United Kingdom
{bneuhofer, dbuhalis, aladkin}@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

Experiences represent the core of the tourism and hospitality industry. Companies seek to create unique and personalised experiences by addressing the needs and wants of contemporary consumers who are looking for something new. While the importance of experiences is unquestioned, the understanding of how to use technology to create personalised experiences is limited in tourism theory and practice. Based on this rationale, this paper aims to explore how companies can strategically use technology to create personalised high-touch guest experiences. Following a single case study approach, this paper contributes by developing a process model proposing technology as a platform of co-creation. A two-fold information and experience flow is introduced between companies and consumers throughout multiple experience touch points. This exploratory study suggests high-tech as a critical factor in the co-creation and facilitation of high-touch experiences.

Keywords: Tourism experiences; ICTs; best practice; co-creation; touch points; case study;

1 Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have had a significant impact on the entire tourism industry (Buhalis and Law, 2008). More specifically, technological advances have transformed how tourism products and services are produced and consumed (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2003, Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003) and tourism experiences are created (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007). ICTs have become an integral part of the entire journey throughout which tourists use technologies to generate richer experiences (Gretzel and Jamal, 2009) and are empowered to co-create more personal experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Recent developments, including an increasing consumer empowerment (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), the rise of prosumers (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), a growing recognition of co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) and a realm of possibilities due to the developments in the field of technology (Wang et al., 2010), have contributed to substantial change in the conventional creation of tourism and hospitality experiences. In addition to exploiting the opportunities of integrating ICTs into experiences, it has become paramount for companies to conjointly create experiences with consumers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Increasingly active and involved consumers are in search of experiences that engage them in a personal

way (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and create value for them (Grönroos, 2000). Yet, it is not clear how the tourism industry can satisfy the continuous quest for meaningful experiences (Gretzel and Jamal, 2009). One way of doing so is to explore the potential of technology for the creation of more appealing tourism experiences. Gretzel et al. (2006) argue that consumers expect marketers to create personal and customised experiences by using the latest technologies available. ICTs are no longer only functional devices but need to be considered as essential features of the creative lifestyle and experiences of contemporary tourist consumers (Gretzel and Jamal, 2009). While there is little question about the importance of technology in experiences, its full role, implementation and implications on the creation of tourism experiences are little understood (Beeton et al., 2006, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007). Based on this rationale, the purpose of this research is to explore technology as a possible facilitator of personalised and meaningful experiences. Considering that companies successfully using ICTs to create enhanced experiences are scarce, the industry relies on few existing best practice examples. Hence, this study sets out to undertake an exploratory case study of a unique hospitality example with the aim to empirically explore how *high-tech* can be used to successfully create personalised *high-touch* tourism experiences. The paper firstly discusses the current theoretical background surrounding consumer empowered experiences and the impact of ICTs on experiences. It then outlines the case study approach, describes the case analysed, discusses results and findings and finally develops a process model depicting the creation of high-tech/high-touch tourism experiences as well as suggesting recommendations for future research.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Consumer Empowered Experiences

Experiences have always constituted an important notion in tourism production and research (Uriely, 2005). Pizam (2010) argues that the creation of positive experiences constitutes the very essence of the hospitality industry. While location and price are important factors in the selection of a hotel, a recent study by Market Metrix confirms the factor *experience* as the main influence on determining the choice of a hotel (Barsky and Nash, 2010). However, over the past few years experiences have undergone a significant change. Consumers no longer purchase services but rather seek experiences obtained by the consumption of products and services (Morgan et al., 2010). The idea of companies creating long-lasting experiences has become of critical importance, as mere products have become replicated and commoditised (Morgan et al., 2010). To differentiate the offer and gain competitive advantage, the creation of experiences has been proposed as the key to success (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). With the proliferation of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and the growing number of businesses offering experiences, it is no longer sufficient to merely design, stage and deliver experiences to consumers. The distribution of power and the roles of and relationships between companies and consumers in the production and consumption of experiences have also changed (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). With the movement towards a producer/consumer: prosumer-centric society, consumers play an active part in both the production and the

consumption of their own experiences (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Instead of consuming pre-packaged products, services or Disney-type experiences (Gretzel and Jamal, 2009), contemporary consumers demand experiences that allow for an equilibrium of control between the company and their own role in the creation of experiences (Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2008). In this new process, the main focus is placed on consumers, their inherent needs and wants and the way in which the company can address these to realise meaningful experiences (Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2008). Ramaswamy (2009) suggests that the key is to allow for an active dialogue and experience co-creation with consumers. The critical question for companies therefore is how to facilitate processes that allow consumers to co-create meaningful experiences. Gupta and Vajic (2000) explain that personalised experiences can be created by the constant evaluation of consumer preferences while interacting in a particular context. In addition to actively engaging consumers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), it is critical to collect, evaluate and respond to relevant information about consumer needs and preferences. In this process, ICTs can play a particular role as useful tools for facilitating interaction (Buhalis and Law, 2008, Egger and Buhalis, 2008) as well as collecting information in an unobtrusive and cost-effective way (Raento et al., 2009).

2.2 Technology for Consumer Experiences

The proliferation of ICTs has implied a great potential and numerous opportunities for many industries, including the tourism industry (Wang et al., 2010). In particular, the advent of the Internet and new forms of communication and social interaction technologies (Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2008) have empowered consumers in determining the way they receive and respond to information (King, 2002). This has fostered the shift in how consumers interact with companies (Buhalis, 2003) by evolving from passive recipients to connected and co-creating prosumers in a technology enabled experience environment (Andersson, 2007, Gretzel et al., 2006). Therefore, Shaw et al. (2011) raise the need to understand how ICTs have influenced the relationship between producers and consumers in interactions and the roles in the conjoint creation of experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Recent studies (e.g. Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009, Gretzel and Jamal, 2009, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009) emphasise that ICTs support experience co-creation in a number of different ways. For instance, technology can function as a platform of interaction between companies and consumers (Hultkrantz, 2002), through which they can establish a dialogue (Buhalis and Licata, 2000) and in turn create more meaningful interrelations (Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009). Furthermore, the use of Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs, videos, wikis, fora, chat rooms or podcasts, including the prominent examples of Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, have fostered communication, social interaction and co-creation of experiences to an unprecedented extent (Dwivedi et al., 2012, Hays et al., 2012). With a variety of interactive tools available, consumers are enabled to co-create experiences in every part of the business system (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Hence, van Limburg (2012) suggests that companies need to embrace the full potential of technology for the creation of more personalised consumer experiences. With technology in place, Piccoli et al. (2003) highlight that companies can collect,

consolidate, manipulate and analyse consumer needs and preferences on an unparalleled scale to facilitate tailor-made experiences. Technology is key for encouraging consumer participation, collecting information and treating different consumers differently (Piccoli et al., 2003). By doing so, a more interactive and participatory relationship between companies and consumers is established, needs of consumers are met and enhanced experiences can be created (Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2008). The notion that consumers increasingly expect highly personalised and customised experiences through ICTs (Gretzel et al., 2006) leads to the rationale of this study; to develop an understanding of how *high-tech* can be used to create personalised *high-touch* tourism experiences.

3 Methodology

3.1 Case Study Approach

An exploratory case study was conducted to develop an understanding of the implementation of high-tech for the creation of high-touch guest experiences. The choice of the case study approach is based on the argument by Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) who highlight that to date most experience creators rely on a few best practice examples of the industry. The understanding of ICTs in the realisation of experiences is still limited in both theory and practice (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007). Hence, a single case study was adopted to assess a leading best practice example from the tourism and hospitality industry in order to develop an understanding of high-tech for high-touch tourism and hospitality experiences. For this particular study, the Hotel Lugano Dante, Switzerland, was selected as a best practice experience example, the evidence for which is supported by being awarded the third place for its overall approach towards excellence in customer service at ENTER2012. The purposive selection of this case was particularly effective, as the goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of what is taking place in the particular context of hospitality experiences. The main focus lies on the “process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Moreover, the selection of a hospitality case provides a particularly suitable research environment as it constitutes the only industry with a high customer service in which it is possible to collect a large amount of information about guests at a multiplicity of touch points (Piccoli et al., 2003). Considering the exploratory nature of this study, a mix of qualitative methods was employed to draw from multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003), triangulate the data and strengthen the results. Methods included a) an assessment of documentary information, presentation slides and written notes from a conference presentation which served to comprehend the practical realisation and process of implementing ICTs into the experience; b) an unstructured interview with the General Manager of the hotel aimed at gathering insights into the company-centric perspective, philosophy and principles of experience creation; and c) an examination of guest feedback of the hotel on the online review website TripAdvisor for the purpose of understanding the consumer perspective of the experience. This threefold process was crucial to complement the data in building a comprehensive understanding of the role of high-tech in the creation of personalised high-touch guest experiences.

3.2 Case Study Description

Hotel Lugano Dante, a 4 star hotel located in Lugano, Switzerland can be considered as a current best practice example for using technology to enhance guest experiences. Having been recognised for its customer service excellence at ENTER2012, it represents a unique example of high-touch experience creation through a technology called HGRM, Happy Guest Relationship Management. In recognising the fact that experiences constitute the number one reason to choose a hotel (Barsky and Nash, 2010), Hotel Lugano Dante has implemented a digital customer relationship management tool into all operational structures of the hotel. This system functions as a platform that amalgamates all interactions of staff and guests on one level throughout the entire journey. By including the pre-arrival, hotel stay and post-departure stage, the system enables a consistent engagement at multiple touch points. These points include hotel operations, such as reservations, reception, housekeeping, breakfast, maintenance, bar, marketing, welcome, sales and revenue. Throughout these touch points the hotel and guests are interconnected. While guests are actively involved and empowered to share personal preferences, these are collected by the hotel to transform simple service encounters into co-created personalised experiences.

4 Case Study Analysis

In the present case study, technology in the form of the HGRM comes into place as a central platform of interaction that unifies all interactions between staff and guests throughout the pre-stay, in-house and after-stay stage of the journey. This technology provides a comprehensive database that saves all information concerning the guest's stay which can be centrally accessed by both staff (company) and guest (consumer) for a conjoint experience co-creation. All staff members have access to the system through computers and mobile devices, such as iPhones and iPads, in all departments of the entire operation system. Guests can access the system through a personalised guest website (MyPage) to communicate, manage the stay, meet and engage with members of staff and select personal preferences. The high level of interactivity represents the key factor of this system to allow for a co-created guest experience by enabling consumers to participate and share relevant information for a personalised and more valuable experience. Buhalis and Law (2008) underline that the interactivity between companies and consumers has generated great opportunities to maximise value propositions. Hence, the analysis of the case study has the purpose of developing a comprehensive understanding of a) how this platform leads to personalised guest experiences, and b) on a more generic level, how high-tech can be used to create high-touch tourism and hospitality experiences. For this purpose, the case study analysis discusses specific stages, touch points, interactions and processes involved in experience creation.

Stages and Touch Points

Touch points in the specific context of hospitality and tourism determine places in which encounters, transactions or consumption take place. As the case shows, there

are a vast number of touch points which include all hotel departments, comprising reservations, reception, housekeeping, breakfast, maintenance, bar, marketing, welcome, sales and revenue. According to the Hotel Lugano Dante, the number of touch points in the specific case of a hotel amount to 750,000 interactions per year. Considering the number of departments and encounters involved, the HGRM facilitates experience touch points not only during the physical hotel stay but also includes interactions prior to the guest's arrival as well as after the departure. This is in line with previous research. For example, Gretzel and Jamal (2009) suggest that ICTs can be implemented to enrich travel experiences, not only on-site but throughout different phases of a journey, including pre, during and post travel. In the *pre-stay stage*, guests are contacted for the first time through their personal web page, called MyPage. This initial interaction primarily serves the purpose of engagement and a two-fold information exchange. First, information exchange occurs in form of an information provision (company to guest) to confirm the booking, provide relevant information regarding check-in time, Internet, travel route and weather conditions. Second, it serves for the collection of guest information (guest to company) to identify questions, special needs, requirements and personal preferences. In addition to exchanging information, personal guest engagement is fostered, which manifests itself in a welcome-soon message and an introduction of individual members of staff (with photos and names) who will be specifically welcoming and undertaking the check-in on the day of the guest's arrival. According to the Hotel Lugano Dante, engaging the guest a few days before the arrival is indispensable as to a) *establish a personal relationship*, b) *engage members of staff* and c) *collect the information needed for a personalised guest experience*. The pre-travel stage proves to be a critical part for both parties to connect, co-create the hotel experience as well as enhance the overall pre-travel experience. Guest reviews from TripAdvisor confirm the importance of pre-travel co-creation by stating: "*We were happy with the service even before we arrived, as they allow us to choose, through an email sent to us a day before the trip, many elements of our stay, from the kind of pillows we wanted to what sort of beverages we would appreciate in our minibar*" (Review TripAdvisor). Another guest adds: "*You can setup your room before arrival. It's really pleasant to feel like home each time we are there*" (Review TripAdvisor).

The *hotel-stay stage* represents the most interaction-intense stage due to the number of personal encounters between guests and members of staff in the physical hotel environment. During the stay, the hotel creates experiences on multiple touch points, including the breakfast room, bar, housekeeping, front office, maintenance or car park. In the hotel setting, the HGRM platform, accessed through computers or mobile devices, functions as a cockpit for all members of staff by centralising all interactions throughout every department of the hotel. By accessing the interactive platform, relevant guest information, based on name or room number, can be easily and instantly retrieved, changed or added, in real time. For instance, these service touch points include managing the guest's room status (ready or not), locating the guest (in room, lobby, restaurant), transferring the luggage (in lobby, room), and managing guest arrivals, requests, as well as already known or newly emerging preferences. By being connected through a synchronised technological platform at all times, information can be exchanged in the hotel anywhere and anytime. This implies that

guest experiences are no longer static and passively designed by a hotel provider but are rather personalised, dynamically and proactively co-created between guests and staff at the specific service encounter in real time. The *post-stay stage* determines checking-out and the guest's return to the home environment. In this stage, it is not the collection of information that is central but rather the personal engagement which is of critical importance. Through the guest's personal web page (MyPage), a welcome back home message, invitation to leave a comment and an invitation to the member page is sent to engage guests in order to build a long-lasting relation, enhance the travel remembrance and post-stay experience and create added value.

Information Flow

The case analysis indicates that the HGRM, as the technology under investigation, represents a two-fold interaction platform. It unites guests, who access the system through their personal page and hotel staff, who use the platform as a cockpit in the hotel environment for the facilitation of experiences. For personalised experiences to be created, it seems evident that two distinct flows for experience creation need to take place, including a) an information flow and b) an experience flow. Information flow is critical as to understand tourist behaviours, choices and concerns, which according to Buhalis and Law (2008) tourism organisations need to gather in all stages, before, during and after the travel. The information provided by guests, either prior or during the stay, is collected on the platform where it can be easily accessed by all members of staff in different service touch points. To co-create their personalised experiences, guests are asked to actively share a range of information indicating preferences, such as room comfort, temperature, ideal bed, special requirements for children, settings for business or pleasure, favourite newspapers, drinks or interests. The consumer perspective testifies the active involvement "*You can pick your preferences amongst many choices: pillows, sheets, heating system, car parking, extra towels and stuff like that. This is UNIQUE*" (Review TripAdvisor). The GM of the Hotel Lugano Dante explains that collecting this information is crucial for establishing a better profile, developing a relationship, making guests feel special, anticipating their needs and in turn creating an enhanced experience in multiple touch points of the journey. This is in line with Buhalis and Law (2008) who affirm that consumer profiling leads to improved interaction between consumers and tourism providers, better personalisation and customisation of the tourist experience. As tourists are increasingly willing to share personal information "in exchange for recognition and better services" (Buhalis and Law, 2008, p. 614), *information flow* is suggested as a prerequisite for the co-creation of personalised high-touch experiences.

Experience Flow

Given that guests co-create by sharing a high level of information, the second flow, namely the creation of high-touch experiences can occur. All members of staff in different departments can access guest information through the cockpit at a glance. This allows them to interconnect, communicate, retrieve existing information as well as upload new information while co-creating the experience with the guest. Considering the intensity of interactions and encounters within a hotel setting, the

adoption of technology proves to be indispensable. It allows members of staff to a) anticipate guest needs throughout multiple touch points, b) address their needs in real time and c) synchronise incoming preferences and needs for future encounters. As a consequence, the interactive platform enabling staff to access the relevant information at the right time in right place, allows them to be proactive and co-create more personal, customised and valuable experiences with the guest. Guest reviews confirm a high value experience, by stating: “My husband and I had an excellent experience at the Lugano Dante from the moment we booked to the time we checked out”, “It was an amazing experience staying here - from beginning to end” (Review TripAdvisor).

Outcome: High-Tech for High-Touch Experiences

Given the high level of interaction and exchange of information, the case study demonstrates that the implementation of high-tech is a crucial determinant for high-touch experiences. The analysis of the case study suggests that with the use of technology the personal touch is intensified compared to non-technology supported experiences. By implementing an engagement platform, such as the HGRM, guests and staff are connected and closer than ever before. The engagement platform not only considers guests but also individual members of staff as central co-creators of the experience. This is demonstrated by providing guests with names of members of staff, job positions and pictures already before the arrival. As every member of staff is equipped with the HGRM cockpit, direct and more personal engagement between guests and single members of staff has become possible. This reduces the anonymity of the conventional service provision and places the focus on meaningful and personal one-to-one relationships. Technology hence needs to be considered key in assisting these personal encounters, making guests feel more recognised in order to lead to a more personal experience at every touch point of the guest’s journey. In order to graphically demonstrate the process leading to high-touch experiences on a generic level, this study has developed a process model, as shown in Figure 1.

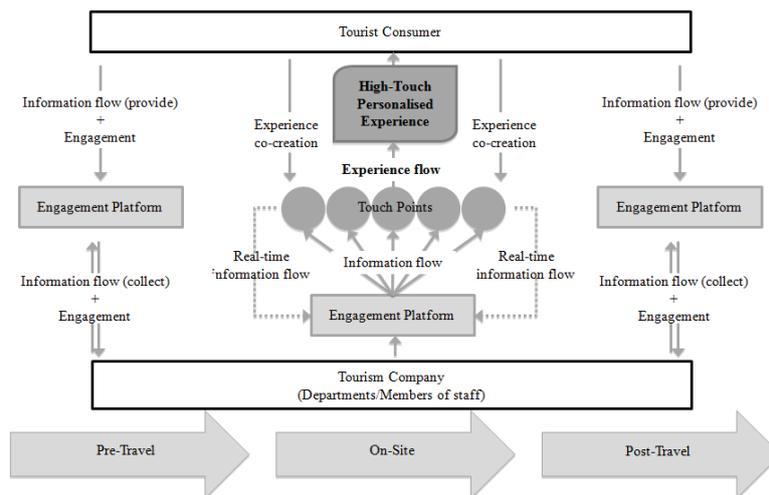


Fig. 1. High-Tech High-Touch Experience Process Model

This graphically presents the process of technology use (engagement platform) connecting the tourism company and the tourism consumer at multiple touch points alongside the pre-, on-site, and post-stage of travel, through which they co-create by providing information (consumer) and co-creating a high touch personalised guest experience (company) .

5 Discussion

Tourism is determined by a high level of interaction between the tourism system, its people and the individual human being as the tourist (Larsen, 2007). The analysis of the case study has revealed a critical insight into how the implementation of high-tech can lead to high-touch guest experiences in the context of the hospitality industry. This study has shown that technology can enhance interrelations between guests and members of staff through integrating single encounters to personalised experiences and co-creation with customer involvement. This research is therefore in line with previous studies, such as Niininen et al. (2007) who argue that information technologies foster consumer centricity by allowing consumers to customise products and personalise their experiences. In this vein, a number of authors support the notion that technology is an ideal instrument to facilitate richer experiences (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007) and enable personalised experiences (Niininen et al., 2007, Sandström et al., 2008). The idea of personal, meaningful experiences *per se* is not new but has been discussed in previous literature (e.g. Benckendorff et al., 2005, Sheldon, 1997, Stipanuk, 1993). However, technology has predominantly been assigned contrasting roles, as a creator, protector, enhancer or destroyer of the tourism experience (Stipanuk, 1993), indicating an existing discrepancy between technology and human experiences. For instance, Sheldon (1997) argues that high-tech travellers value the application of technology for the delivery of better travel experiences, whereas high-touch tourists repute technology as disruptive element in the experience. In this view, it is argued that high-touch tourists escape the modern technology-dominated world in search for human interactions. Sheldon (1997) suggests not to completely neglect technology for these consumers but to apply it only in the background of services. In a similar vein, Benckendorff et al. (2005) emphasise that technology can either be implemented in the backstage, where it is hidden from the tourist, or in the front stage, where it is overtly implemented for the creation and enhancement of tourist experiences.

The analysis of the present case study predominantly contradicts the existing literature proclaiming a contradictory role and detrimental effects of ICTs use on high-touch experiences. Rather, the case study leads to the suggestion that high-tech and high-touch experiences are by no means mutually exclusive but reinforcing. Technology is used in the foreground operations, proactively, together with consumers and constitutes an integral part of the overall guest experience. Technology functions as a platform of interaction requiring active involvement of both the company and the consumer to co-create the experience together. Technology hence plays a central element in adding a more personal touch, enhancing the level of interactions and engagement, building more meaningful relations and adding value to the overall experience. Before guests arrive they have already established the parameters of

service delivery and have their expectations managed. The GM of Hotel Lugano Dante underlines that “*the use of technology can add real value to the service. But the service itself must be of high quality as technology on its own does not provide good service but can only be used to enhance good service*”. As future tourism products need to be more creative and personalised (Gretzel and Jamal, 2009), technology needs to be considered as a key tool in the co-creation of personal experiences. This study argues that through the effective use of interactive technologies for engagement, co-creation and personalisation, the tourism industry can satisfy the growing quest for meaningful experiences.

6 Conclusion

The creation of successful experiences is the essence of the tourism and hospitality industry. This study aimed to provide an understanding on how *high-tech* can be used to create *high-touch* personalised tourism experiences. The Hotel Lugano Dante case study offers a leading hospitality example and provides invaluable insights into facilitating high-touch experience creation. This study has contradicted the existing literature by arguing that technology must not be understood as mere technological artefact that hinders human interaction. Instead, it constitutes a key tool to facilitate more individual, one-to-one, personalised experiences. High-touch experiences are facilitated through technologies allowing for two-fold information and experience flow. Consumers are interactive, involved and share information while the company and its members of staff are interconnected and using information to facilitate co-created high touch experiences with consumers. Engagement is critical for this co-creation process. Successful organisations of the future will use innovative technology to create innovative, unique, personal high-touch experiences.

The present case study offers a number of implications for tourism theory and practice. In terms of theory, the study contributes to the current understanding of technology in the co-creation of contemporary tourism and hospitality experiences. It provides an integrated high-tech high-touch experience process model demonstrating the underlying technology-enabled processes necessary in the creation of personal experiences. In terms of practical implications this case study provides evidence that technology, instead of being regarded as a destroyer of high-touch experiences, is a key facilitator of personal experiences with a high-touch. This is particularly relevant to the tourism industry, as a sector which is dependent on creating more personal experiences by reducing interchangeability of the tourism product and creating distinct value for the consumer. As any study of an exploratory nature, a number of limitations need to be acknowledged and which could be addressed in the future. Further research is needed to build upon and extend the understanding developed in this study. The single case adopted in this study could be further strengthened by conducting a multiple case study to diversify examples and to allow for a comprehensive cross-case analysis. In addition to the company perspective, consumer studies are needed to complement these findings and lead to a holistic understanding of high-touch experiences from both a company and a consumer perspective.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Carlo Fontana, General Manager of the Hotel Lugano Dante for his contribution and willingness to participate in the case study.