

## **IS CONSUMER EXPERIENCE THE NEXT BEST THING? A REVIEW AND RESEARCH AGENDA PROPOSITION**

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### **Resumo**

Literature recognizes consumer experience as an important construct to understand consumer behavior as well as the dominant basis for market differentiation. There is a growing body of knowledge on consumer experience, but little is known about the characteristics of its scientific production. Considering this, we performed a systematic review in order to provide an overview on consumer experience developments. We selected 414 articles for the final analysis and categorized them according to demographic, institutional and methodological criteria. Results indicated the predominance of empirical work, quantitative methods and organizational perspective. We concluded consumption experience is at the top of marketing agenda on research and practice, but it is still an incipient construct, lacking theoretical discussions, especially concerning its conceptualization, and the development of consumer perspective, which will lead consumer experience to the comprehension of consumption phenomena on its totality and complexity.

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### Abstract

Literature recognizes consumer experience as an important construct to understand consumer behavior as well as the dominant basis for market differentiation. There is a growing body of knowledge on consumer experience, but little is known about the characteristics of its scientific production. Considering this, we performed a systematic review in order to provide an overview on consumer experience developments. We selected 414 articles for the final analysis and categorized them according to demographic, institutional and methodological criteria. Results indicated the predominance of empirical work, quantitative methods and organizational perspective. We concluded consumption experience is at the top of marketing agenda on research and practice, but it is still an incipient construct, lacking theoretical discussions, especially concerning its conceptualization, and the development of consumer perspective, which will lead consumer experience to the comprehension of consumption phenomena on its totality and complexity.

**Keywords:** consumer experience, experience, literature review, research agenda.

### 1. Introduction

The term experience, used to indicate any individual's experience, became popular in the end of last century. Since then, each discipline uses the term accordingly to the its interests: in philosophy, experience is a personal living that transforms the individual; in sociology and psychology, it refers to a cognitive activity that enables the individual's development; in anthropology, it is known as the way individuals live their culture (Carù & Cova, 2003).

In consumer studies, the roots of consumer experience date to the 1960's with consumer buying behavior process models (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the 1970's, the interest of literature relies on customer satisfaction and loyalty, and this new scenario raises a focus on consumers' perceptions and attitudes about their experiences. By that time, consumer experience was understood as a process related to product and service acquisition, used as a synonym for buying experience. But the period also saw the beginning of the debate on how experience would change economy and consumer behavior (Toffler, 1970) and in the beginning of 1980's, consumer experience as a research tradition was initiated with the seminal article by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982).

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) brought to consumer behavior body of knowledge important experiential aspects – fantasies, feelings and fun – so far neglected by process information models and economic theories used by marketing scholars. Therefore, consumer experience is conceived as a personal experience with emotional value, based on the interaction with products and services (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In the same decade, service management studies gained relevance identifying the context and elements of consumer experience and customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). According to Sundbo (2015), it was a turning point for service research: from an emphasis on service quality to service experience.

In the 1990's, relationship marketing emerges with an opening to consumers' responses, fundamental part of consumer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). At the end of the decade, marketing literature watches the raise of the experience economy, a concept introduced by Pine and Gilmore (1999; 2013) that, although its managerial character, contributed to consolidate the interest of scholars on consumer experience. As reported by Addis and Holbrook (2001), this moment sets the transition from a traditional marketing perspective to the experiential perspective. Because of this change, the relevance of utilitarian function of products and services decreases at the same time that symbolic value and meaning increases.

According to Sundbo (2015), consumer experience basis is the comprehension of the consumer not only as a buyer, but also as someone who engages with products and services in an experiential perspective. In this sense, consumer value in the experiential paradigm embraces functional, emotional, psychological and sociological perspectives. It is important to mention that consumer experience is considered an important source of competitive advantage, once it promotes emotional responses from consumers, affecting marketing variables such as purchase intention, satisfaction, loyalty and word-of-mouth behavior (Kranzbühler, Kleijnen, Morgan, & Teerling, 2017).

On this regard, Palmer (2010) analyzed the evolution of the dominant basis for differentiation: from tangible design features to service benefits, relationships and, finally, experiential values. Similarly, Kranzbühler et al. (2017) indicated that research early studies about experience on consumer literature focused on extraordinary experiences with services encounter, going through service environment ambience, including tangible and intangible aspects and, more recently, embraces sensory marketing. As we see, consumption experience appears to be a relevant topic for marketing literature development. In this sense, we wonder: is consumer experience the next best thing?

The work of Kranzbühler et al. (2017) revealed a growing body of knowledge on consumer experience, indicating the urge of developing its theoretical basis. Nonetheless, little is known about the characteristics of its scientific production in terms of its demographic, institutional and methodological features. According to Mazzon and Hernandez (2013), the analysis of scientific production on a specific topic is relevant so researchers can show concrete evidence of the content development. In this sense, we found contributive to explore the academic developments on consumer experience, in order to draw an overview of its evolution, understand why the concept is so important and provide guidance for future investigations.

Therefore, the main objective of this article is to analyze the characteristics of scientific production on consumer experience. As specific objectives, we intend to (i) identify articles, authors, journals, universities and countries that studied this topic the most; (b) verify the methodological aspects used on the studies; and (iii) set a research agenda on consumer experience.

## 2. Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the scientific production on consumer experience to develop an understanding about its conceptualization, characteristics and theoretical and empirical gaps. In this sense, systematic reviews help researchers to acknowledge, organize and summarize information on a specific topic, allowing them to draw conclusions about a specific phenomenon (Kitchenham, 2004), being appropriate in this research. According to Tranfield, Benyer and Smart (2003), systematic reviews need a detailed research protocol. Therefore, we followed the protocol of Dybå e Dingsøyr (2008), which recommends a successive article filtering process in four stages, as illustrated on Figure 1

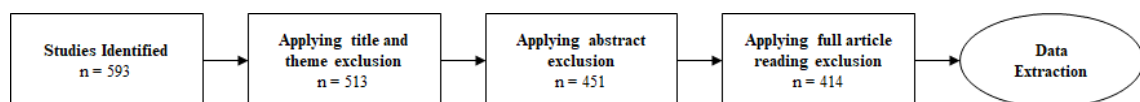


Figure 1. Research Protocol

Source: adapted from Dybå e Dingsøyr (2008)

Initially, we conducted an exploratory phase to establish inclusion and exclusion criteria, based on previous literature review. We decided to include only peer-reviewed papers that analyze experience under consumption theories. Our search included studies from 2013 to 2017, in order to keep the most recent developments in consumer experience and to draw a

realistic scenario of its scientific production. We set this date restriction based on the publication of the Handbook on the Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2013), in which the authors update the last twenty year of debate on consumption experience. We accessed five databases (EBSCO, Emerald, ScienceDirect, Scopus and Google Scholar), so we could compare results and have a broader view on consumer experiences from different perspectives. The keywords used were consumer experience, customer experience and consumption experience.

After the exploratory phase, we initiated the instructions from Dybå e Dingsøyr (2008). In the first stage, 593 articles were identified, using the keywords as inclusion criteria. The second stage suggests the analysis of title and keywords of the paper, in order to check its adherence to consumer experience. Duplicates must be excluded in this phase as well. At the end of second stage, 513 papers were kept. Third phase advises abstract reading, resulting a 451 papers sample. The last phase demands full article reading, and the 451 papers were fully read in order to check if the articles converge with the research theme. A final sample of 414 articles was obtained.

Subsequently, we extracted data related to year of publication, author and co-author, journal and type of article, to check if they were empirical or conceptual studies. The empirical articles were analyzed by nature of the research (qualitative, quantitative or multimethod), context of application and research design. The last step concerns the identification of the main themes developed by the papers. Afterwards, the relevant information was classified, summarized, analyzed and synthetized in order to identify the main characteristics of the scientific production on consumer experience.

### 3. Results

This section presents a synthesis of the results obtained from the data extracted on the systematic review. From these outcomes, we elaborated an analysis of the scientific production on consumer experience, which raised a few reflections about the development of its knowledge, allowing us to propose a research agenda.

Firstly, we analyzed our paper sample by the **year of publication**. Results indicated a productive period, with an average of 82 articles by year, and a growth trend, as the graphic on Figure 2 illustrates. Considering consumer experience a recent topic in marketing literature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), the increase of publications reveals the potential of this subject in expanding and transforming marketing studies and practice.

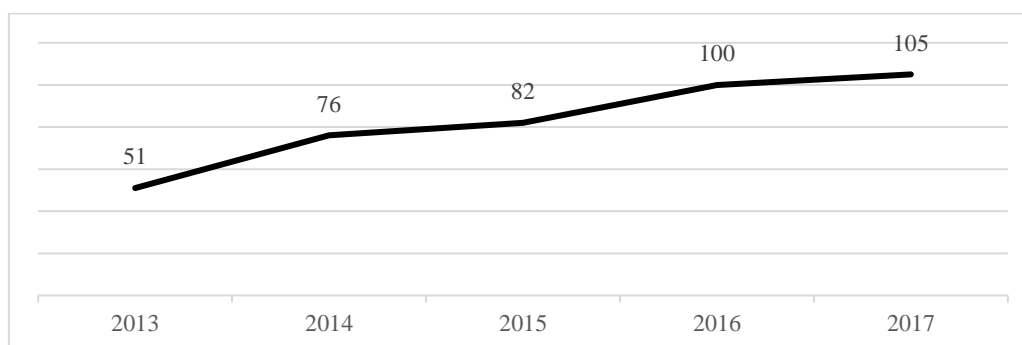


Figure 2. Consumer experience studies by year

In the following, we tracked the articles **by author and co-authors**. This action has led us to more than a thousand researchers. Table 1 summarizes the authors who published the most, considering the researches with three or more papers published in the period. We also present their institution and its country.

Table 1

**Main researchers on consumer experience**

Author	Publications	Institution	Country
Zillur Rahman	7	Indian Institute of Technology	India
Imran Khan	6	Indian Institute of Technology	India
Philipp Klaus	6	Cranfield University	United Kingdom
Edwin N. Torres	5	University of Central Florida	United States
Sajad Rezaei	4	Taylor's University	Malaysia
Wei Wei	4	University of Central Florida	United States
Anil Bilgihan	3	Florida Atlantic University	United States
Antonella Carù	3	Bocconi School of Management	Italy
Bernard Cova	3	Kedge Business School	France
Ching-Jui Keng	3	National Taipei University of Technology	Taiwan
Donald C. Barnes	3	University of North Carolina Wilmington	United States
Eleonora Pantano	3	University of Calabria	Italy
Frederic Ponsignon	3	University of Exeter	United Kingdom
Janet R. McColl Kennedy	3	The University of Queensland	Australia
Nan Hua	3	University of Wisconsin Eau Claire	United States
T. C. Melewar	3	Brunel University	United Kingdom
Tseng-Lung Huang	3	National Cheng-Chi University	Taiwan
Tze-Hsien Liao	3	Tatung University	Taiwan

From these results, it is reasonable to say that research on consumer experience is pulverized, as it is a topic of interest of a substantial amount of scholars in a myriad of institutions around the globe. We also could not detect any researches networks, what enables us to assume there is not a concentration of the research in a specific country or institution. From this result, we assume that consumer experience scientific production is in an expansion phase, but also it is a global construct, present in the most diverse contexts.

Afterwards, we reviewed the articles **by journal**, in order to identify the top 10 sources of publications. The *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* and the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* share the first place with 21 publications each. Next, the *European Journal of Marketing*, the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* and the *International Journal of Hospitality Management* appear in the second position with 18 articles each. The *Journal of Business Research* has 17 publications about consumer experience; the *Journal of Service Management* and the *Journal of Services Marketing* have 16 papers each; and the *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* published 15 articles in this matter during the analyzed period. As we can observe, these sources of publication on consumer experiences are journals focused on tourism and hospitality, service management and strategic marketing. The only journal concentrated specific on consumer behavior is the *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, with 10 papers on consumer experience.

Next, we examined the **articles by type**, in order to identify theoretical essays and empirical research. As a result, it was found the predominance of empirical articles ( $n = 367$ ) over theoretical discussions ( $n = 47$ ). This result conducts us to a few considerations. First, consumer experience is considered a new construct in marketing literature, without an appropriate definition (Jain, Aagja, & Bagdare, 2017). In this sense, a construction under development needs further conceptual and theoretical debate, once a consolidated concept will

allow better understanding of its roots, purpose, implications, measurements and the relationships with other variables. Therefore, our findings indicate the insufficiency of conceptual works, especially when we compare the amount of theoretical and empirical works in the context of a construct in development. Second, it is important that empirical research also meet this issue. Based on this, we propose a deeper evaluation of the empirical articles identified in our systematic review.

The empirical articles were first analyzed **by the nature of the research**. In this regard, we identified 232 quantitative works, 121 qualitative papers and 14 multimethod articles. The quantitative and the multimethod studies are aligned with the positivist philosophy, as well as 57 qualitative studies. According to Scussel (2017), positivist marketing studies have a managerial interest, with the main goal of developing market knowledge, resorting to a formal logic. The other 64 qualitative papers were developed under alternative approaches, consonant to an interpretativist logic, which aims for social phenomena understanding by communication and interpretation. These studies enable more subjective analysis and allow consumer perspective to take place on organizational perspective (Scussel, 2017).

This though has led us to analyzed the empirical articles **by perspective**. In this sense, we observed the prevalence of organizational perspective ( $n = 220$ ) over consumer perspective ( $n = 147$ ). These results indicate the supremacy of studies devoted to business strategy, managerial implications and the development of extraordinary experiences able to attract and retain customers, impact on word-of-mouth and, as consequence, promote organizational performance. Our interpretation meets the traditional marketing thought and its roots on strategy and competitive advantage creation (Sheth, Gardner, & Garrett, 1988).

Regarding the studies on consumer perspective, considering its convergence with a positivist approach, it is valid to say they fulfill the objective of market knowledge formation on how consumers react to organizational stimulus. Once again, there is a confluence with strategy, considering that positive associations on consumers' minds lead to higher competitive positions (Keller & Lehmann, 2006).

We also tracked the **context of application of the empirical researches**, so we could recognize the top 10 market segments where consumer experience is valued the most. Tourism and hospitality industry constitutes an important research field for consumer experience, with 109 publications. Food and beverage sector shares the second position with retail with 37 papers each. E-commerce comes in third place, with 35 articles, followed by service companies (17), entertainment industry (16) and information technology and communications (13). Banks, supermarkets and fashion retail come next, with nine publications each. Lastly, eight studies were developed in the context of shopping malls.

The results obtained on the tourism and hospitality, food and beverages, and entertainment industries are aligned with the main experiential aspects of consumption, as described by Holbrook and Hirshman (1982), once it is important to put light on elements such as fantasies, fun, feelings and emotions. These authors believe that experience should be a personal experience with emotional value that happens when consumers interact with products and services. These outcomes also put light on technology as a mediator of the interaction between consumer and brands, firms, products and services, once online shopping and online communication constitute a growing trend, changing the way consumers relate to companies and how they live searching and buying experience.

Next, we accessed research design. Concerning **data collection**, it is important to mention that a considerable amount of studies used more than one data collection technique to achieve their objectives. On this matter, we identified an array of means used by researchers to study consumer experience. The findings indicate the prevalence of structures questionnaires, used on the 208 surveys and 34 experiments analyzed in our systematic review. Considering the predominance of quantitative studies, this is a presumable result. Subsequently, interviews



were used in 83 works, revealing the power of this qualitative technique. Netnography, a participating observation which has the online environment as empirical field, was chosen by 22 articles as data collection technique. In the following, we have non-participating observation (13), focus group (10), case study (9), narratives (8) and ethnography.

After that, we investigated the top ten **data analysis techniques**. We recognize the prevalence of statistical analysis, corroborating the amount of quantitative papers, but also the advances on organizational perspective and its predictive character. In this sense, the most used analysis technique was structural equation modeling, used in 100 papers, followed by confirmatory factor analysis (51), exploratory factor analysis (45), regression (37), ANOVA (29), variance analysis (6) and MANOVA (6). On the qualitative side, we have the predominance of content analysis, used by 61 articles, corroborating our finding that interviews are the most used data collection technique. Narrative analysis comes next with 19 papers. Afterwards, social networks analysis was employed in 13 papers. It is relevant to mention that, in a few cases, more than one data analysis technique was used, eight articles declared to have used data triangulation.

Lastly, we reassessed empirical articles in order to identify the **main themes** developed on the papers. Table 2 illustrates our findings.

Table 2

**Main themes developed under consumer experience studies**

Theme	Publications
Consumer experience design	72
Consumer experience antecedents	48
Holistic experience	47
Consequences of consumer experience	42
Customer experience management	38
Service experience	25
Online consumer experience	20
Consumer subjective experience	17
Brand experience	15
Experiential value	14
Consumer experience dimensions	10
City experience	8
Product experience	6
Shopping experience	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>367</b>

As Table 2 shows, the main debate on consumer experience literature are the building blocks of consumer experience: there is a strong focus in investigating how to create a positive experience, the elements of the experience, its determinants and outcomes. This interest has a strategic nature, once the discovers from studies in these matters contributes to improve business strategy formulation and helps the development of new products. The management of consumer experience is also an important topic, close to service experience and its managerial character. In this sense, there is an interest in discovering how consumer experience affects other variables such as satisfaction, loyalty, word-of-mouth, consumer attitude, behavioral intentions and relationship between clients and companies.

This result is another evidence of the organizational focus of consumer experience literature, once the design of the experience implies the analysis of organizational efforts on

developing value proposition that will be noticed by consumers and transformed in experiences. Most of the studies focus on customer journey and interaction points between consumer and company during the experience. Our findings also reveal the growing interest on user experience, the interaction between consumer and virtual context and the impacts of technology on consumer experience. Finally, experience co-creation was found to be an important topic for consumer experience research development, once it brings consumer and organizational perspectives together, setting a win-win situation in which both parties perceive benefits from the interaction.

Nevertheless, Table 2 shows another research tradition, focused on the consumer side of the experience. Studies dedicated to the holistic experience and to consumer subjective experience bring light on the consumers' side on experiences: their emotions, perceptions, feeling and the meanings they attribute to experiences. These studies also embrace the transformations experience can make in consumers' lives. This outcome indicates the growing concern with the subjacent aspects of consumption that affect and change consumer experience, context in which the impact of experience in the individual's life is the main interest of investigations. In this regard, literature recognizes the importance of qualitative approaches, once they open opportunities to explore symbolic elements of consumption experience, as well the relation consumers develop with the symbols, meanings and emotions inherent to their experiences.

#### **4. Research Agenda Proposition**

Considering the results on previous section, we believe the most important gap to be pursued in future investigations is the development of an appropriate definition for consumer experience. It is a consensus that literature needs an appropriate definition for the construct (Palmer, 2010; Sundbo, 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Kranzbühler et al., 2017). Although this lacuna is not a surprise, it hasn't been fulfilled yet, raising a question: what are the reasons to this absence?

We recognize that scientific production on consumer experience privileges empirical researches, revealing the urge for theoretical works capable of reaching an agreement on its definition and consolidating the construct, developing a strong theoretical framework that support future empirical findings. There is also the inadequate use of consumer experience and service experience as synonyms (Jain et al., 2017). This conceptual confusion may be a consequence of the focus on organizational perspective. Its understanding of consumer experience as an organizational attribute, context in which excellence in service creates emotional responses on customers, generates behavioral intentions and leads to better revenues and business performance. The preponderance of quantitative researches may have an association with this lack of conceptual accordance as well. At last, the few exploratory studies investigating how consumer experience occurs on consumers' minds and among different consumers' groups can contribute with this scenario.

Therefore, we strongly advise theoretical essays in order to meet this necessity. Efforts in this sense can also include the creation of research groups, online discussion forums, conceptual debates on conferences and meetings and call for papers.

Another important topic in our research agenda highlights the context of research. We observed that consumer experience has been investigated in traditional marketing segments, such as tourism, retail, banks, technology and service companies. In this regard, it is important to expand the context of our works, considering the experience of consumers with public organizations, healthcare system, government and the third sector, as examples. This consideration leads us to the need of strengthening consumer perspective.

The theoretical works analyzed in this systematic review attest literature focus on organizational-related themes, especially those focused on experience design, experience



creation among corporative customers, service experience and customer loyalty on experience economy. In this sense, conceptual developments corroborate the empirical articles, confirming the prevalence of studies dedicated to the organizational perspective, with reduced attention to consumer perspective. As we observe, the comprehension about consumers' role on consumption experience constitutes an important research gap.

Literature needs to acknowledge the resources consumers bring to the interaction context during experience creation, their roles on experience context, their feelings and the meaning involved, as well as the impact of this in their daily routine and life experience as a whole. Our findings confirm need to understand the holistic nature of consumer experience (McColl-Kennedy, Gustafsson, Jaakkola, Klaus, Radnor, Perks, & Friman, 2015). Regarding that, we recommend that future investigations not only explore the interactions between consumers and firms, brands, products and services, but also which interactions can generate consumer experience and how consumer reaction behaves as time goes by.

According to Scussel (2017), consumption society comprehension demands the study of phenomena on its totality, embracing its history and context. In this sense, the author suggests the adoption of complexity as a starting point on marketing studies: consumption phenomena should not be investigated in isolated parts, but as an effort to comprehend and reveal the relationship between these parts.

Considering the above, the need of broadening our view on consumer experience, and the predominance of quantitative studies over qualitative works, alternative research designs may contribute to the theoretical and empirical development of the construct. In this respect, qualitative studies with an interpretative approach are welcome, as well as methodologies that allow the comprehension of consumption phenomenon as a whole, such as ethnography. Moreover, netnography has shown to be very helpful in understanding the impact of technology and internet on consumer behavior (Kozinets, 2014), being an alternative to explore the online consumer experience.

## 5. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to analyze the characteristics of scientific production on consumer experience. We examined 414 articles published between 2013 and 2017, a productive period for the construct that revealed a growth trend. Consumer experience is a topic of growing interest in marketing literature, studied by a great number of researchers around the globe, from different institutions and countries, revealing a pulverized scientific production. It was found that the *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* and the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* are the main sources of publications in the investigated period, as well as Zillur Rahman, Irmran Khan and Philipp Klaus are the authors that published the most.

The results demonstrated the prevalence of empirical researches over theoretical essays and the preference of researchers for quantitative methods and organizational perspective. Tourism and hospitality industry was the preferred context of application of empirical studies. Surveys and interviews are the most used data collection technique and, concerning data analysis, statistical analysis and content analysis are the favorite ones. As the main themes discussed on consumer experience, there is an inclination for consumer experience design and its elements and outcomes. Concerning research design, there is an opening for alternative methods, especially qualitative techniques from an interpretativist approach, which we believe that will help literature advance on consumer perspective. We also highlight the urge of theoretical development and an appropriate definition for consumer experience construct.

Regarding the limitations of the article, our sample was restricted to four databases and did not cover the entire existing literature on the topic. Moreover, we only reviewed journal articles. In this case, working papers from conferences, theses, dissertations and books

contribute to the development of consumer experience studies. Another limitation is the period selected for our analysis, the last five years. Although it does not cover the scientific production since its beginning on the 1980's, we have tracked a significant amount of work on consumer experience, describing the most recent findings on this matter and providing guidance for future investigations.

For future researches, we recommend periodic updates of the characteristics examined in this article. The same can be performed for conference papers and doctoral works, once they are work in progress and their analysis may indicate new trends for scientific production on consumer experience. It is also interesting that this kind of analysis are conducted for countries' national production, investigating specific contexts and also enabling future cross-country comparisons. This may approximate researches around the globe with similar interests, strengthening the literature on consumer experience.

As contributions, this article proposes an overview of scientific production on consumer experience, revealing what has been done, what is in progress and, most importantly, the inconsistencies and the gaps that need further attention. The reported characteristics and issues can be used as a guide by researchers, conference coordinators, professors and institutions. As managerial implications, our review indicates important issues to be developed by firms in order to formulate strategies, design positive experiences and create value for customers.

Although the great volume of publications and the growing interest of marketing scholars on the topic, consumer experience literature is in an expansion phase, especially concerning its conceptual framework. Despite of the need of theoretical development and conceptualization, consumer experience proved to be a subject of great significance to marketing literature development. The number of publications, the growth trend and the volume of organizational perspective studies demonstrated that consumer experience not only is shaping consumer behavior and business management studies, but also affects the way companies and brands conduct their strategies and relate to customers. For this, we risk to say: consumer experience is the next best thing. Researches may face challenges on fulfilling the lacunas on its literature, but they will contribute to a broaden comprehension of consumption phenomena.

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