

The Customer Experience and Insight (CXI) Research Group presents

# Defining experience Beyond experiential

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DR LOIS SHEDD



## Defining experience: beyond experiential

The 'experience economy'<sup>1</sup> is all around us, but what does it really mean for consumers?

By Dr Lois Shedd

Tasmania's remarkable transformation as a tourist destination is a prime example of the social and economic importance of the growing experience economy, with visitor numbers increasing by 40 percent between 2012 and 2017,<sup>2</sup> and 47 percent visit primarily for the purpose of experiencing the state's natural and cultural offerings.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, these cultural offerings have become increasingly focused around Hobart's most controversial art gallery, The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). In addition to the popularity of the gallery itself, MONA's summer and winter festivals (known as 'Mofo' and 'Dark Mofo', respectively) have continued to attract huge numbers of visitors from interstate and overseas. Attendees at Dark Mofo, for example, jumped from 297,000 to 427,000 between 2016 and 2017—in spite (or perhaps because) of the controversy surrounding a performance art piece centred on the dismemberment and disembowelment of a bull carcass in front of a live audience.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, such controversies have become central to the 'Dark Mofo experience', which plays with the idea of 'controversy for controversy's sake' while simultaneously positioning itself as something more—something fundamentally challenging and ultimately transformative. This unique festival therefore embodies the contemporary consumer cultural ideal of transformative experiences. Such experiences are not only 'memorable events' staged by companies to 'engage individual customers'<sup>1</sup> but recognise that 'people are willing to pay for experiences that have the potential to change the way people live, work, and play'.<sup>5</sup>

Transitioning from the mindset of the 'experience economy' to that of the 'transformation economy', however, requires rethinking what consumption experiences *are*. For example, American property group JLL have identified six dimensions of experiential retail: *intuitive, human, meaningful, immersive, accessible, and personalised*.<sup>6</sup> Exploring a unique case study such as Dark Mofo through the lens of these dimensions highlights the insufficiency of such frameworks for understanding the complexities of consumption experiences, especially in the context of the transformation economy.

### DARK MOFO'S EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSIONS

One thing that makes Dark Mofo such an interesting case study is that its wild success belies its imperfect or even subversive performance across the given range of experiential dimensions. For example, it seems obvious that experiences should be *intuitive* to consumers—that is, 'props' (goods) and 'stages' (services and spaces)<sup>1</sup> should be designed so that they make sense without requiring significant cognitive effort from consumers. However, much like the traditional and pagan festivals Dark Mofo is partly inspired by, the Dark Mofo experience subverts this expectation by deliberately fostering a sense of mystery and uncertainty—occasionally tipping over into genuine confusion due to poor communication on the festival organiser's part.

Similarly, while *personalised* goods and services are increasingly popular and provide a number of emotional and psychological

benefits for consumers,<sup>7</sup> Dark Mofo subverts this experiential dimension as well by forcing consumers to adjust *themselves* to an unfamiliar and potentially confronting experience. Rather than goods and services being changed and adapted to suit each consumer's unique needs, consumers are the ones who must adapt and be changed *in* and *by* the experience to derive the full value of it.

This, of course, points to two experiential dimensions in which Dark Mofo and events like it excel: they are inherently *immersive* and often *meaningful* for the consumers who experience them. JLL define immersive experiences as 'appealing', 'captivating' and 'enjoyable'<sup>6</sup>—much like Dark Mofo's Winter Feast food, wine and spirits mini-festival. However, more generally, Dark Mofo focuses on immersing consumers in ambiguous and potentially negative cognitive and emotional responses such as fear, anger, and disgust. This is important, as it is the means through which consumers derive meaning from the experience—that is, it is through these challenges that transformation can be achieved.

### BEYOND EXPERIENTIAL: THE CORE OF EXPERIENCES

These examples highlight that consumption experiences are not sufficiently explained or defined by experiential dimensions alone, at least in the way that these are commonly understood. Instead, we must look at the core of the consumption experience: what *is* the experience, and what is it *doing*?

One approach to answering this question has been to define experiences by their broader structural/anti-structural and func-

tional/anti-functional dimensions.<sup>8</sup> In this view, consumption experiences are either structured ('stable, consistent and orderly') or not structured, with consequences that are either clear and intended ('functional') or ambiguous and unintended ('anti-functional').<sup>8</sup> These dimensions interact to produce four core types of experiences: *performance*, *liberatory*, *stochastic*, and *adventure*.<sup>8</sup>

Any given consumption experience can be heavily weighted towards one of these types of experience, or it can be a combination of them. For example, at Dark Mofo, the Winter Feast represents a *performance experience*. This type of experience tends to reproduce familiar and relatively mundane social patterns in explicitly commercial settings, often with the aim of reaffirming existing structures and beliefs such as family or community relationships.

In contrast, *liberatory experiences* attempt to use extraordinary communal settings to transcend or break through these familiar

social patterns. In the context of Dark Mofo, the Nude Solstice Swim might represent a liberatory experience that seeks to break social norms around nudity through a shared extraordinary event.

*Stochastic experiences* tend to reproduce familiar social patterns but with unpredictable—and potentially negative—consequences. For example, Dark Mofo's Night Mass creates a carnivalesque atmosphere dedicated to drinking, dancing and serendipitous discovery across a range of familiar settings such as parties and bars.

Meanwhile, *adventure experiences* tend to occur within extraordinary settings that disrupt both structure and function. Dark Mofo's provocative art installations—from the sacrificial bull in 2017<sup>4</sup> to the buried artist<sup>9</sup> and inverted crosses<sup>10</sup> of 2018's festival—might fit into this type of experience. By disrupting consumers' ordinary social patterns, these experiences can elicit 'unmanageable and uncontrollable'<sup>8</sup> responses such as out-

rage and fear.<sup>11</sup> However, this disruption is the point, creating space for transformation.

### WHAT ABOUT EXPERIENCE?

Dark Mofo shows that consumption experiences go much deeper than specific experiential elements; they have a core meaning defined by their structure and function. However, where does *experience* fit in all this?

We know that experience is a holistic concept, which goes beyond individual interactions and even individual experiences to incorporate broader temporal and contextual factors. For example, what interactions occur before and after a given consumption experience?<sup>12</sup> And how does culture influence the definition of value within that experience?<sup>13</sup>

It is important to integrate this deeper understanding of consumption *experiences* with a broader understanding of holistic *experience*. Only then can we both understand and provide true value to customers in the transformation economy.



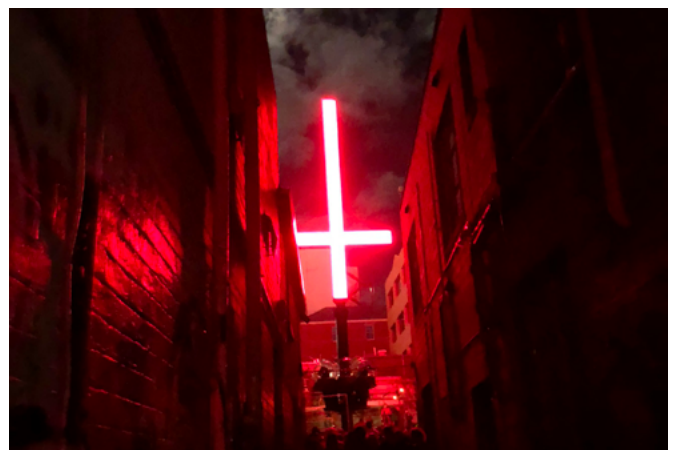
**Performance experiences.** Winter Feast: Food, wine and spirit vendors came together under a single warehouse roof for seven nights of banqueting throughout the festival.



**Stochastic experiences.** Night Mass: A roving party over the two festival weekends, with hidden 'artworks, performances, cocktail lounges, clubs and liturgical raves, tucked away in a sprawling nocturnal neighbourhood'<sup>14</sup> designed to surprise.



**Liberatory experiences.** The River Derwent: Hobart's harbour is a key site for Dark Mofo, hosting the Nude Solstice Swim and conveying visitors to and from the festival's heart at MONA.



**Adventure experiences.** Controversy for controversy's sake: Dark Mofo's liberal use of inverted crosses, glowing red against the night sky throughout the city centre, was the main controversy for 2018's festival.

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### About CXI Research Group

The Customer Experience and Insight (CXI) Research Group is part of Swinburne Business School.

CXI is a full-service research group that conducts leading-edge research centred on experience to build customer-led strategy and innovation.

The CXI team specialises in a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods and frameworks. Our four pillars of expertise span the fields of retail and consumer behaviour, sport and wellbeing, service innovation, and employee experience.

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