Alive and kicking: Evaluating the overseas package holiday experience of grey consumers in the United Kingdom

Bridget Major and Fraser McLeay
Northumbria University, UK

Abstract
An overseas package holiday is a high-value purchase and a unique and complex service product with a fragmented experience, which can take place for several months or more. There is a gap in the experience literature on overseas package holidays, despite the fact that this industry generates approximately one third of all trips and expenditure in the United Kingdom. This article aims to increase the understanding of this service product and critically evaluate the consumer experience. The authors focus on ‘grey’ consumers who form a market segment that is growing in size and extremely important in the travel industry. However, it has been neglected in consumer behaviour literature that explores the experiential aspects of extended service encounters. Template analysis is used to identify six key categories that contribute to the package holiday experience of UK grey consumers holidaying in Tenerife. The six categories are the preholiday experience, travel and transit experience, self-made experience, provided experience, satisfaction, and loyalty. The grey market for package holidays is alive and kicking with many greys seeking fun, entertainment, enjoyment, and active participation in activities and meeting other guests. Undoubtedly, the Thomson Gold model, which disallows stays by those younger than 16 years, is highly suited to the needs of this market. The security and consumer protection offered by package holidays is highly important to these consumers who appear satisfied with the quality of their experience, which leads to exceptionally high levels of loyalty and repeat visits.

Keywords
Experience, grey market, package holiday, quality, satisfaction

Introduction
Tourism is one of the world’s largest industries, employing more than 220 million people worldwide and generating more than 9% of global gross domestic product. The package holiday sector is an important part of the tourism industry and expects to generate 30% of international travel trips to the United Kingdom and 40% of travel expenditure by 2015 (Mintel, 2010). It is estimated that UK residents purchased 14.4 million package holidays in 2010, spending £9.4 billion (excluding transport) in the process (Mintel, 2010). The package holiday is a high-value purchase and a unique and complex service product with a fragmented experience, which can take place for several months or more. When international travel is involved, it commences in the consumers’ home country; however, the main experiential element takes place at the overseas destination.

In the management and marketing literature, the concept of the ‘experience’ and whether it should be staged or managed has received much contemporary academic focus (Morgan and...
These authors see the tourist experience, like other consumer experiences, as beginning with motivation and expectation and resulting in satisfaction or dissatisfaction. However, they point out that this view is too simplistic, as it leaves out fascinating features of tourism and leisure such as the role of the place and the multiphase nature of a holiday. Experiential marketing studies in the retail, banking, tourist attraction, and other service sectors are placing a growing emphasis on managing the customer experience so that it lies at the centre of the strategic planning, marketing, and operations of an organisation (Morgan and Watson, 2007; Schmitt, 1999). The concept of the ‘experience’ has received much contemporary academic focus, some of which has evolved from service industries such as retail and banking, and discussions of the experience within a marketing context have a long history (Palmer, 2010). There is a vast plethora of experience research on a wide variety of forms of tourism and different typologies of tourists such as festivals (Morgan, 2006), walkers (Den Breejen, 2007), sport tourists (Bouchet et al., 2004), urban tourists (Page, 2002), geographical experiences (Li, 2000), women tourists (Small, 1999), shopping tourists (Jansen-Verbeke, 1991), visitor attractions (Vitterso et al., 2000), river rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993), and food (Quan and Wang, 2004). It appears, however, that research into the actual ‘experience of the package holiday’ has been limited, although some authors have made reference to it in a broader tourism context (Ryan, 1995, 2002; Wickens, 2002).

The aim of this article is to increase our understanding of the package holiday product/service by critically evaluating the experiences of the consumers. The focus is on the grey market or seniors market segment that has long been recognised as extremely important to the industry (Lehto et al., 2008; Ryan, 1995). Travel is a high priority for greys who are mostly in their retirement years (Ipsos Mori, 2010; Lehto et al., 2008; Patterson and Pegg, 2009). Specific objectives of this article are to: (i) review relevant literature on the package holiday and the tourism experience focusing on the grey consumer; and (ii) to identify and analyse the descriptive experience of the package holiday consumer in the grey market.

The focus is on package holiday consumers in a Canarian resort managed by Thomson Holidays, part of TUI Travel PLC. TUI Travel is the largest tour operator in Europe and the United Kingdom by revenue, and had 35.2% of the top 20 tour operators share of the market in 2010 (Mintel, 2010). Thomson and First Choice Holidays (Thomson’s sister company) offer package holidays in more than 43 countries around the world and from 21 UK airports (Mintel, 2010). The provision of access by TUI demonstrates that the research being undertaken is of interest to the industry and validates the practical contribution that research of this nature makes to business practice.

**Literature review**

In the following sections, an overview of the package holiday and the grey market is provided and relevant literature is reviewed. There is insufficient research published on the overseas package holiday, which is surprising given its economic importance and scale; 16.5 million British people took foreign package breaks between winter 2010 and summer 2011 (Pearce, 2011). Research examining the consumer experience and the relationship between the experience, satisfaction, quality, and loyalty is summarised, before the focus moves to describing the package holiday experience.

**The package holiday**

The concept of the package holiday is widely credited to Vladimar Raitz, a Russian emigrant to the United Kingdom (Evans et al., 2003). In 1950, Raitz chartered a plane to Corsica and provided accommodation in the form of tents with camp beds, to make up the package (Bray, 2001). Raitz’s company was called Horizon holidays, which remains a trading name of TUI Travel PLC today.

The legal (European Directive) definition of a package holiday as stated in the Package Travel, Package Holidays, and Package Tours Regulations, 1992 is a:

> pre-arranged combination of at least two of the following components when sold or offered for sale at an inclusive price and when the service covers a period of more than twenty-four hours or includes overnight accommodation. a) Transport, b) accommodation, c) other tourist services not ancillary to transport or accommodation and accounting for a significant proportion of the package (Legislation.gov.uk, 1992).

This research focuses on UK consumers traveling overseas as part of a package, and the
The all-inclusive package concept, whereby the price generally includes all meals, snacks, and local drinks (Hatch, 2011), has received a tremendous boost in recent years due to the concerns of consumers regarding the strength of the euro to the pound and the UK recession and associated uncertainties (Fearis, 2011). First Choice holidays is now selling only all-inclusive holidays. 'The operator says the move follows a steady rise in demand for all-inclusives from cash-conscious Brits and all-inclusives are now the holiday of choice for many British consumers' (Hatch, 2011). The likelihood of travellers choosing an all-inclusive package is determined by perceived travel risk and financial constraints (Wang and Davidson, 2002). This is supported by Swarbrooke and Horner (2007) who purport that the all-inclusive package provides a feeling of security for less experienced travellers in unfamiliar environments. The research undertaken here is not, however, focused on the all-inclusive package although it was available within the hotel. The vast majority of clients including those interviewed were on a half board basis.

A 'package' is therefore more than a literal description, incorporating a wide variety of products and therefore experiences (Urquhart, 2006). Research examining package holiday bundles has mostly taken an economic perspective and examined changes in profits or costs and economies of scale, rather than individual consumer behaviour or experiences (Rewtrakunphaiboon and Oppewal, 2004). Limited research has been conducted on the tourist experience in the package holiday area (Cliff and Ryan, 2002).

Ryan (1995) cites Laing (1987) who claims that the primary reason for consumers taking package holidays was that little planning was needed and that there was little risk involved. Laing (1987) stated that the reasoning behind taking package holidays was not necessarily clear. It could be regarded as a habitual action with consumers rarely considering their reasoning behind this preference. Laing (1987) suggests that extensive qualitative research may inform the personal and individual factors that need analysis into holiday taking. Laing (1987: 179) concludes by stating that, 'A closer grasp is needed of the individual’s perception of package tours and their associated meaning.' In this study, we attempt to address an apparent gap in the literature by conducting research in this area.

The grey market

The grey market segment is also referred as the ‘senior’, ‘mature’, ‘older’, or ‘muppie’ (mature, upscale and postprofessional) market (Littrell et al., 2004; Shoemaker, 2000). There are more than 21 million greys in the United Kingdom (Mintel, 2008) who have long been recognised as extremely important in the travel industry (Lehto et al., 2008; Ryan, 1995), as they place travel as a high priority during the retirement years (Ipsos Mori, 2010; Lehto et al., 2008; Patterson and Pegg, 2009). When compared with other market segments, grey consumers generally have more discretionary time, higher levels of discretionary income, and less consumer debt. They may have retired or their children may have left home leaving parents as empty nesters with the mortgage having been paid off or having significantly decreased (Littrell et al., 2004; Ryan, 1995). As one of the fastest growing market segments in the travel industry, greys are most likely to participate in package holidays (Mintel, 2010; Shoemaker, 2000). One in four consumers aged between 55 and 64 years and 15% of adults aged more than 75 years take a package holiday (Mintel, 2010). Greys are responsible for an increasingly larger share of holiday spending and take more holidays than average (Evans et al., 2009; Littrell et al., 2004; Patterson and Pegg, 2009). Although there are varying opinions and interpretations as to the age at which a consumer is classified as a grey (Gilmartin, 2007a, 2007b; Shoemaker, 1989), for the purposes of this research, greys are categorised as those aged 50 years or older and seemingly this was a majority view in definitional terms and consistent with the approach used by Mintel (2010). Although many of the respondents were considerably older, it was
decided not to rule out those in their early 50s, who had some valuable observations to make on their holiday experience.

Ryan (1995) in his research on individuals older than 55 years in Majorca stated that, after retirement, older travellers retain their importance to the industry. In addition to having leisure time, significant numbers have inflation proofed pensions and some inherit wealth.

Despite being a promising segment on account of size and potential for future growth, grey travellers are often overlooked in the tourism literature (Littrell et al., 2004). They are important for the industry as greys prefer to travel at off season or shoulder season therefore filling important beds and flight seats (Patterson and Pegg, 2009). Greys are also predisposed to spending much lengthier periods on holiday in a resort than other vacationers, amounting to several weeks and even months (Littrell et al., 2004). One of the main reasons that travel is given this high priority in later years is because greys prefer to buy experiences rather than material possessions – they feel that these will enrich their lives and make them feel young (Patterson and Pegg, 2009).

Grey travellers are often treated as a homogenous group with similar tastes and interests and as such are provided with packages and services with generic appeal (Lehto et al., 2008). This lack of segmentation has resulted in an ‘inaccurate stereotyped view of the elderly’ (Shoemaker, 1989: 14). However, people age at different rates and the greys have different motivations, destination preferences, preferred modes of travel, and different values (Moschis et al., 2000; Patterson and Pegg, 2009). Although the general travel literature reports that different tourist types will have different experiences of host destinations, and has identified tourist typologies and taxonomies of tourists (Cohen, 1979; Wickens, 2002), the literature that attempts to segment grey consumers is limited. Exceptions include Littrell et al. (2004) who identified two types of older tourists. One group is ‘younger at heart’ and feel healthy, seeking fun and enjoyment, using travel as a vehicle to achieve this. Another is ‘older at heart’ and more concerned with security, illness, danger avoidance, and the smooth operation of travel plans. Although we do not seek to directly segment grey consumers, an objective is to explore their rich diversity of package holiday consumption experiences.

The consumer experience

Much academic research has been conducted on the experience economy since the seminal work of Pine and Gilmore (1998) which claimed that in competitive marketplaces, companies must design and stage engaging experiences. However, a great deal of the literature discusses the nature of the tourist experience without actually evaluating what it is. Confusion remains about the definition of the experience with several different classifications (Scott et al., 2009). Morgan (2006) has written extensively on the experience and his definition is one of the most straightforward. He suggests that ‘the word experience is widely used in leisure, retail and other service sectors to describe the essence of what customers are seeking and paying for’ (Morgan, 2006: 305).

Travel, as a service industry, invokes a special form of consumer behaviour and involves the purchase of heterogeneous products/services and an experience that is intangible at the time of both purchase evaluation and consumption (Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Mayo and Jarvis, 1981). Purchasing a holiday requires complex, high involvement decisions that are of emotional significance because of the high costs, risks, and uncertainty associated with a product/service that cannot be inspected prior to purchase/consumption (Goodall, 1991; Seaton and Bennett, 1996; Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007; Wang and Davidson, 2010).

Tourist motivation behaviour and the purchasing decision process have been extensively studied within the marketing and tourism behaviour literature and many models have been developed (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; Mannel and Iso-Ahola, 1987; Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Mayo and Jarvis, 1981; Moutinho, 1987; Schmoll, 1977; Um and Crompton, 1991; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). Traditional consumer decision making models have been criticised because ‘consumers do not necessarily embark upon extensive, active, cognitive laden, realistic and goal directed decision-making behaviour when purchasing complex high-risk consumer products’ (Erasmus et al., 2001: 87) such as package holidays. Many of these models stem from a post-positivist view and sit in the human rationality paradigm, with their authors considering the tourist decision-making process as being a sequential or hierarchical process (Decrop, 1999). Decrop argues that although models
based on positive paradigms are useful, they do not take into account important considerations such as emotions and feelings (Hyde, 2000: 178).

A great deal of the research examining tourist decision-making, tourism choice processes, and consumption appears to neglect a very important experiential element of consumption by solely concentrating on the motivators and determinants behind the purchase that influence preholiday choice (Decrop, 1999; Hudson, 1999; Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007). They primarily focus on destination variables and therefore are guilty of neglecting behaviour and decisions which occur during the vacation. Other literature describes the influence that previous travel experiences impact on future decision-making (Gilbert, 1991) or post-purchase reflections of the experience (Woodside, 2000). Concepts of fantasies, feeling, and fun are part of tourist experiences but are often omitted in tourist behaviour textbooks and articles (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). The total holistic experience of consumers participating in package holidays has not been examined in the academic literature and therefore is a primary focus of this research.

**Satisfaction, quality, loyalty, and the experience**

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the traditional foci of either motivations or postevaluation research. However, quality and satisfaction clearly impact the evaluation of experience by a consumer and any discussion without them would be incomplete. Service quality is notoriously difficult and elusive to define (Parasuraman et al., 1985), particularly when referring to tourism experiences as it can be open to multiple definitions (Jennings et al., 2009). A well-accepted view of quality is that it is ‘a comparison between expectations and performance’ (Parasuraman et al., 1985: 42). Satisfaction and particularly tourist satisfaction is equally difficult to define with a number of conceptual definitions (Bowen and Clarke, 2002). Satisfaction remains an ‘elusive, indistinct and ambiguous construct’ (Yuksel and Yuksel, 2002: 53) and is often used incorrectly as a synonym for the term ‘quality’ by tourism researchers (Bowen, 2001). The fulfilment of a desire is an accepted definition (Collins, 2004: 1072).

A tourist experience involves interactions with service deliverers, other guests, and the wider host society, and satisfaction is seen as a consequence of the tourist experience (Bowen and Schouten, 2008; Crouch et al., 2004; Hapers and Mossberg, 1999). Frochot and Kreziak (2009) discuss the complexities of understanding satisfaction in an experiential context and over a long stay. Satisfaction clearly shares many characteristics related to a desirable experience but its relationship with behavioural intention and repeat booking have been questioned (Palmer, 2010). Palmer (2010: 199) sees satisfaction and quality as ‘parallel or contributory constructs’ to the experience. Satisfaction and an experience are, therefore, inextricably linked.

Academics often use the terms quality and satisfaction interchangeably or with the assumption that expectation lies commonly at the root of both the terms. However, Bowen and Clarke (2002) regard satisfaction to be more emotional than quality. They argue that judgements of service quality compare more to service expectations of industry standards and managerial specifications, whereas service satisfaction involves making comparisons of the consumer against their own specifications and benchmarks. While the experience of a tourist is an indispensable factor in developing satisfaction judgements, it is not essential when making quality judgements (Bowen and Clarke, 2002: 298). Pullman and Gross (2003) affirm, however, that although satisfaction is important it will not necessarily lead to loyalty.

Previous researchers have explored the value of experience to a brand (Mitchell and Orwig, 2002), the relationship experience (Payne et al., 2009), and loyalty (Dimanche and Havitz, 1994). Evans et al. (2009) importantly recognised that those aged more than 50 years can be more loyal, which is extremely important for organisations offering products to this segment. Given the highly competitive market place that tourism and hospitality organisations operate in, loyalty has become a key focus with providers seeking to continuously design and create enhanced experiences (Pullman and Gross, 2003). Dimanche and Havitz (1994) maintain that loyalty is central to the study of tourist behaviour and cite the old adage that keeping customers is less expensive than creating new ones, thus the proffering of loyalty schemes by airlines and hospitality providers. Many authors argue that a well-designed and well-managed experience can give rise to loyal consumer behaviour through the formation of emotional attachment through the service process delivery. Wickens (2002) in her research conducted in Chalkidiki defined the characteristic of
the ‘Lord Byron’ tourist (stemming from Byron’s love of Greece) as an annual ritual of revisiting the same place and the same accommodation. Clearly, the concepts of quality and satisfaction as they relate to the holiday experience are complex and subjective judgements are not within the scope of this article to discuss in further depth. Suffice to say that if they are managed effectively, there is the opportunity for organisations to develop relationships with very loyal customers, in this instance, package holiday consumers.

**The package holiday experience**

When compared with many other service sectors, the travel sector (including package holidays) is very fragmented, which presents particular challenges for managing and evaluating a consumer’s experience (Ryan, 2002). For example, a customer may believe that they are purchasing a product/service from one company when, in fact, the experience is delivered by a variety of intermediaries such as retail travel agents, airlines, local ground transportation, and hoteliers (Baum, 2002; Van Rekom, 1994). An additional complexity in managing package holidays and therefore associated tourist experiences is that the experience takes place over several months (Dellaert et al., 1998). Finally, package holidays take place in at least three different geographical locations (Leiper, 1979). The first is the generating area where consumers usually purchase their package holiday, which is arguably where the experience first commences. The second involves inward and outward travel, while the third is in the international destination where accommodation and food are provided and excursions and other elements of the experience are delivered. Complex travel decisions can be made on many separate elements that are interrelated (Baum, 2002; Dellaert et al., 1998), although this would refer to independent travel more than the package, which is a simpler decision in that by its very nature it is ‘all in’. Holiday makers, however, evaluate each individual element of their holiday but perceive the overall holiday separately as a total sustained experience and assess it as such (Ryan, 2002). For some tourists (particularly those taking package holidays), the actual choice of destination is not as important as elements such as price, timing, departure airport, and general convenience factors (Ryan, 2002; Seaton and Bennett, 1996).

Other elements such as past experience, security, risk reduction, social interaction, and climate have also been shown to influence a consumer’s travel experience (Andereck et al., 2006; Cutler and Carmichael, 2010; Dann, 1981; Lehto et al., 2004; Ryan, 1995; Seaton and Bennett, 1996; Trauer and Ryan, 2005). Consumer protection and financial risk associated with the holiday purchase are the current topical areas with gaps in current protection having been identified (Dennis, 2008). An air tour operator’s license (ATOL; Civil Aviation Authority, 2012) and The Travel Association membership (ABTA; ABTA The Travel Association, 2012) provide financial security in case of operator failure to consumers. However, not all consumers will be protected by these (depending on how they have made their booking).

Ryan (1995) argues that older travellers use their past experience as a basis for holiday selection and that reducing risk is important for greys. Wickens (2002) reports that ‘ontological security’ is important for tourists, the security that is closely related to routine and that humans have in their self-identity and the environment that they are in. Her findings show that many older travellers’ holidays are affected by minor health problems and that in such cases, they choose to take a prepackaged holiday as they see it as free from health risks and physical hardships. Security, familiarity, and being made to feel welcome are all important (Wickens, 2002). Socialising and social interaction including social settings, and interactions with staff and other holiday makers also contribute to a tourist experience (Andereck et al., 2006; Cutler and Carmichael, 2010; Mossberg, 2007; Trauer and Ryan, 2005). Many hotels provide entertainment in some form for their guests. Rating of this is very subjective but Ryan (1995) found that performances and professionalism were not highly rated. One of his respondents stated, ‘I’m not impressed with the entertainment – too much hi de hi’ (Ryan, 1995: 212). Finally, it has also been suggested that sunshine and climate and an ability to relax in a safe environment influence the experience of the consumer (Ryan, 1995, 2002; Wickens, 2002). The sun and warm climate are clearly prime motivators for consumer demand.

**Methodology**

This research adopts an interpretivist approach that uses qualitative methods and undertakes phenomenological interviews. In doing so, it answers calls from other researchers that argue that there is a need to study how holiday makers
express their feelings about their particular holiday experiences (Jackson et al., 1996; Patterson and Pegg, 2009; Ryan, 1995). Morgan and Xu (2009: 222) state that ‘as service experience is inherently interpretative, subjective and affective, qualitative approaches would seem best suited to understand and analyse it.’ Woodside and MacDonald (1994) also suggest that there is a need for rich thick descriptive data in the travellers own words.

The research method was to conduct semistructured interviews with the UK package holiday makers on a package holiday and at their overseas destination. An initial pilot study was conducted in Majorca in November 2010. This was very useful in refining and making questions more appropriate and elicited the rich descriptive data sought. Approximately 30 questions were developed, but given the flexible nature of semistructured interviews, some of these questions were merged during the course of the interview. The questions were derived from knowledge and literature on the package holiday process and discussion relating to the experience in the literature review. The areas addressed were the package holiday, frequency, likes, dislikes, journey, transfer, booking methods, and experience. Other topics such as holiday shopping, meeting other guests, the dinner experience, the destination, and the hotel and evening entertainment were also discussed. Consumers were asked whether they made their own holiday experience or whether the tour operator made it for them, and what they liked to do on holiday, about the weather, and how they perceived holiday value.

The primary findings were collected using semistructured interviews conducted during a week in January 2011 in a Thomson Gold (part of TUI UK) hotel in Los Gigantes, Tenerife. The participants were guests staying at the hotel and all were Thomson Gold clients. The nature of the ‘Gold’ brand is such that it attracts older consumers and those interviewed were all aged more than 50 years, with the majority being in their 70s. After 12 interviews, it became obvious that saturation had been reached as each interview (ranging from half an hour to an hour with views mostly from couples) began to produce very similar findings. The data were analysed using template analysis, a technique that assists in thematically organising and analysing textual data (King, 2004; King and Horrocks, 2010). One of the key advantages of template analysis is that it is particularly suitable for phenomenological and experiential research making it very appropriate for this research. It is regarded as a flexible technique that permits researchers to tailor it to match their requirements (Cassell and Symon, 2004). The interview guide assisted in the construction of the template built up from continual evaluation of the transcripts and resulting finally in clearly identified themes. The qualitative findings cannot be generalised beyond the context that this research was conducted. Figure 1 shows how the interview questions were compiled.

Findings, analysis and discussion

This section addresses the second objective of this study, which is to identify and analyse the descriptive experience of the package holiday consumer in the grey market. The results of the research were classified into six key categories that contribute to package holiday experience of a grey consumer. The development of these categories was also informed by the results of the literature review and is illustrated in Table 1. Key themes within each category are also presented. Each category is discussed in turn in the paragraphs that follow.

Preholiday experience

It was apparent that greys were using the internet to evaluate holiday prices but frequently booked through their local travel agent with whom they had a relationship and who would agree to offer the price found on the internet. The value of the package was clearly important to these consumers; Respondent B commented on the package:
it is cheaper in the long run, we’ve worked out the possibility of renting an apartment here, but by the time you have worked out your plane fare and your transfer from the airport, it is more expensive.’ Respondent D’s view was similar: ‘when you’ve got an apartment, you’ve got to book your own airfare you know, then when you get to the airport, its £15.00 for a taxi.’ Consumers’ knowledge of all-inclusive holidays was evident; Respondent A stated, ‘I like the all inclusive concept’ and Respondent E said, ‘we go to Turkey fairly regularly on an all inclusive.’ However, some on the half board option regarded this as all-inclusive; Respondent D said, ‘the food is all inclusive, now that things have got dearer, (this is) important you see.’ This concurs with Swarbrooke and Horner (2007), Wang et al. (2002), and Wang and Davidson (2010).

The value of the experience and its link to the brand (Mitchell and Orwig, 2002b) was illustrated by the emphasis on the security of booking with a well-known brand. This feeds also into the ‘prebooking experience’. Respondent A indicated, ‘I tend to go with the big boys; I am not worried that Thomson’s will go bust if Thomson’s went down there probably wouldn’t be too much left of the economy anyway!’ This concurs with Ryan (1995) and the claim of Laing (1987), which states that that the primary reason for consumers taking package holidays was that little planning was needed with ‘no risk’ involved. Sheldon and Mak (1987) argue that the reasoning behind the package holiday purchase was convenience and price. Respondent B commented: ‘Well it’s all done for you, you don’t have to worry about when your flight is going

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**Table 1. The grey market package holiday experience.**

**Preholiday experience**
- Booking: Predominantly checking price on internet then booking through local travel agent.
- Perception of value that the package holiday is cheaper than other holiday options.
- Knowledge of all-inclusive concept but half board seen as good value.
- Security and trust of booking a large, well-known brand.
- Preholiday shopping is not an important part of the experience.

**Travel and transit experience**
- Local airport access is more important than the actual destination choice.
- Consumers knowledgeable about the system and well travelled.
- Meeting by Rep is important and smoothness of transfer to resort.

**Self-made experience**
- Socialising: Seeing friends from previous holidays and making new friends is an important part of the experience.
- Appreciation of the ‘Gold’ visitor type.
- Provided entertainment is important to the holiday experience but views on quality were variable.
- Getting away from everything, relaxing, reading, and doing nothing.
- Walking/strolling/exploring is a valued activity. References to ‘health’ issues and ‘when they were younger’.
- Proud of use of local transport.
- Friendliness of host community, other guests, and staff.
- Shopping in resort was not particularly important.

**Provided experience**
- Hotel greeting by friendly management and recognition as repeat customer is important and meaningful.
- The Gold experience with no children under 16 years being allowed in the hotel was very important to these consumer experiences.
- The weather: The sunshine is extremely important.
- Accommodation: Tea-making facilities not provided – very British phenomena that was important. The provision of an empty fridge with no mini bar was appreciated for value-conscious guests to be able to stock themselves.
- Hotel: Importance of ‘feeling at home’ and security provided by staff.
- Ease of package holiday strongly emphasised.
- Excursions – not taken on account of having done them previously and viewed as expensive when provided by Thomson.
- Reps service: Strongly related to feelings of security especially by elderly and frail guests.

**Satisfaction**
- Satisfaction is indicated by loyalty and the very high numbers of repeated bookers each year.

**Loyalty**
- Related to value perception of holiday.
- Enormously loyal consumers.
or what time or anything, it’s all in front of you.’ The package was seen to represent good value for money, which was important to these consumers. Given the importance retailers attach to preholiday shopping, it was surprising that consumers did not rate this activity. Consumer loyalty and satisfaction from previous experiences feed into the preholiday experience and are discussed below under the following categories.

Travel and transit experience

The results suggest that local and accessible airports were particularly important as they made the total journey shorter and smoother. Meeting and greeting the ‘Rep’ and the provision of a transfer was also important to the experience of those interviewed. Seaton and Bennett (1999), and Ryan (2002) suggested that an actual destination was not as important as price, departure airport, and other convenience factors.

Self-made experience

The results confirm that activities such as socialising contributed to the experience of those interviewed, which corresponds to the findings of Andereck et al. (2006), Cutler and Carmichael (2010), Mossberg (2007), and Trauer and Ryan (2005). These take the form of interactions between guests, hotel employees, and local service providers. Respondent A commented that, ‘I do think that’s one of the things with Gold, you generally get a certain sort of person who’s a bit more ... amenable sort of socially.’ The results also identified that walking is important, as suggested by Ryan (1995). The resort of Los Gigantes did not lend itself particularly well to this activity, being carved out of rock face on a cliff; nevertheless, guests shared jokes about walking up ‘Cardiac Hill’ as it was known! It was evident that respondents perceived the key experiences on their package holiday are ‘self-made’. All guests interviewed were very firm about the fact that it was up to them to ‘create’ their own holiday experience; ‘they (the tour operator), provide the setting and the facilities, they got us here, it’s now up to us isn’t it?’ (Respondent B).

Provided experience

Tour operator–offered excursions were generally not taken by those interviewed. Many of them were regular repeated visitors. Respondent C commented, ‘You know if you have been once, you don’t want to go again . . . ’ and Respondent F said, ‘their (Thomson excursions) are much more pricier than what you would do yourself . . . go down there, they do it a lot cheaper.’ Thomson provided nightly entertainment for guests. This was seen as an important element of the holiday by most of the visitors. However, the quality of provision was regarded as variable; Respondent F commented, ‘but if they do say evening entertainment provided, I don’t think it should be amateurish . . . ’ and Respondent E stated, ‘the entertainment’s important . . . em well when I was here in August, it was absolutely rubbish, it was the Reps that were doing most of it and it was awful.’ Respondent A stated that, ‘I missed Elvis last night, I was upstairs but I could hear the tenors singing was brilliant but it can get a bit regimented sometimes.’ These findings concur with Ryan (1995) on the rating of entertainment provision.

Thomson Gold hotels do not accept guests under the age of 16 years (Thomson, 2011) and this appeared to be very important to these grey consumers’ experience. Respondent K stated, ‘but we like the fact, it sounds awful, but there are not many, well there aren’t any, little children, yeah, nobody under 16.’ Respondent H commented, ‘there’s no children and its British, I think these are two big factors at this hotel . . . especially important for the elderly and middle aged to elderly.’ Respondent C agreed that this factor was important to their experience; ‘we don’t like the noise, we’ve done all that . . . when you come down here, there’s no screaming.’

Unsurprisingly, the weather was one of the most important factors for the holiday experience. The Canaries, particularly some areas in Tenerife, are renowned for the reliability and quality of winter sun. The grey market in particular finds the sun important for relaxation and the concept of ‘mindlessness’ (Ryan, 1995). The interviewed grey market travellers fit into the older at heart segment as identified by Littrell et al. (2004), and were concerned about security, illness, the avoidance of danger, and the smooth operation of travel plans. This concurs with ‘ontological security’ as discussed by Wickens (2002). Respondent E stated that, ‘well, we always feel that there’s the security of having someone on site . . . who you can relate to really and deal with any problems you might have and ‘all the rest of it’. This security provided by the Reps and the hotel staff is clearly important;
health wise and everything else, isn’t it, you’ve got somebody there haven’t you?’ Respondent C’s views were similar, ‘well they look after us on Thomson’s don’t they?’ Respondent H commented on the package, ‘well I think it is especially important now, I mean as we’ve got older, we want least hassle as possible.’

Financial protection in the event of operator failure came through as important to these guests, who did appear knowledgeable on the subject. Respondent F stated, ‘I think if you’re ABTA, you’re guaranteed safety ... oh, no, no, no, I wouldn’t go unless it was ABTA.’ Respondent D referred to an instance when they travelled without protection, that is the gap in consumer protection referred to earlier (Dennis, 2008), ‘when we was with the er apartment, we weren’t protected were we ... ’ J commented on the package holiday; ‘well the benefits are it’s more secure em than booking on your own ... from a financial perspective.’

Satisfaction and loyalty

These themes stem from previous holiday experiences feeding into the overall package holiday experience as well as the prebooking experience. Consumer perceptions and judgements of events experienced and an evaluation of experiences can also be regarded as an outcome variable that affects satisfaction and future purchase behaviour of similar products (Woodside, 2000; Yuksel and Yuksel, 2002). Satisfaction and its link to the tourist experience (Bowen and Schouten, 2008; Crouch et al., 2004; Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003) was emphasised in the results of this research by the nature of the extremely high rebooking and loyal behaviour shown. This refutes the question of Palmer (2010) regarding satisfaction and its relationship with behavioural intention and repeat booking. It was not uncommon for many of those interviewed to have booked this particular holiday every year for 20 or more years; Respondent C commented, ‘we come every year ... for at least 25 years,’ with Respondent D saying, ‘shall I tell you the first time we stayed at this hotel? 1973.’

Conclusion

This article has reviewed literature that has a bearing on the package holiday experience. The results and subsequent discussion reflect upon issues that have been touched upon in previous research but were not usually explored in detail. It has been suggested that managers should provide consumers with experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). However, the categories ‘provided experience’ and ‘self-made experience’ show a division between experiences provided by organisers/management and those that are created by consumers. The results indicate that for the greys interviewed, key experiences on their package holiday are ‘self-made’. It would appear that tour operators provide the setting and the facilities but guests make their own experiences. The Thomson Gold model that stipulates no guests under the age of 16 years is enormously successful with grey holiday makers. The underlying significance of the importance of security due to age and health issues came across as supremely important. This security is provided through trust and familiarity with the hotel, its management, and the tour operator brand, resulting in very high levels of loyalty and repeated visit. It is anticipated that these qualitative findings and rich data will be of interest to tour operators and that there are implications for management and enhancing the consumer experience. It appears that the areas which could be improved upon are the quality of provision of evening entertainment and the excursions on offer.

This article presents the initial results of a larger research project that is being undertaken with Senior Management of TUI PLC in order to ascertain their views on these findings and how these may influence their operations. The opportunities for further research in this important and yet under-researched subject are considerable. Views of senior managers in industry need to be obtained on how the package holiday is designed for and experienced by, the UK grey market. These, together with the views of the consumers can then lead to the development of a framework describing the package holiday experience for this market. The results of this research strongly indicate that greys are indeed alive and kicking. Their overseas package holiday experience is extremely important to them and is a very sustainable concept as is evidenced by the results of this research.

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