

Attraction in Escape Games: The Role of Experiential Communication, Appropriation, and Immersion

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Abstract

Escape games have emerged as an emblematic form of experiential leisure, grounded in immersion, interaction, and emotional stimulation. In this context, understanding the theoretical determinants of consumer attraction constitutes a major challenge, both for research in experiential marketing and for practitioners in the immersive leisure industry. This conceptual article proposes a theoretical framework aimed at explaining how the experiential dimensions of communication, appropriation, and immersion positively influence consumer attraction in escape games. Drawing on a critical review of the literature in experiential marketing, consumer behavior, and the experience economy, the analysis highlights the role of experiential communication in shaping anticipation and desire, the importance of appropriation in enabling consumers' symbolic projection, and the contribution of immersion to cognitive and emotional engagement.

Building on these theoretical insights, an integrative conceptual model is proposed to structure the relationships between these variables and to open new avenues for research on the mechanisms underlying attraction in immersive leisure contexts.

Keywords: Experiential marketing; consumer attraction; immersion; experience appropriation; experiential communication; escape games.

Introduction

Over recent years, immersive leisure activities have experienced remarkable growth, driven by evolving consumer expectations toward more engaging, emotional, and memorable experiences. Within this dynamic, escape games have emerged as an emblematic form of experiential consumption, based on the

combination of storytelling, social interaction, problem-solving, and sensory immersion.

Unlike traditional leisure activities, these formats do not merely offer a service or an activity; rather, they stage a holistic experience designed to elicit consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement. This evolution aligns with the broader framework of the experience economy, according to which the value perceived by consumers increasingly lies in the lived experience rather than in the offering itself (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

In the field of experiential marketing, several studies have highlighted the central role of experiential communication, experience appropriation, and immersion mechanisms in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors (Schmitt, 1999; Carù & Cova, 2003; Gentile et al., 2007). However, despite the growing interest in immersive leisure, the literature remains relatively fragmented regarding how these dimensions interact to explain consumer attraction in the specific context of escape games.

From this perspective, the following research question arises: to what extent do the experiential dimensions of communication, appropriation, and immersion contribute to explaining consumer attraction in escape games? This issue is of dual relevance. From a theoretical standpoint, it enables the articulation of several concepts from experiential marketing within a unified explanatory framework. From a managerial standpoint, it provides valuable insights for practitioners seeking to enhance the attractiveness of their immersive offerings.

Through a critical review of the literature, this article aims to propose an integrative conceptual model linking these theoretical dimensions to consumer attraction. The

objective is to contribute to a better understanding of the experiential drivers likely to stimulate interest and participation intentions in escape games.

1. Overview of Customer Experience in Experiential Leisure in the Literature

Contemporary developments in consumption practices have profoundly redefined how value is perceived by consumers. Whereas traditional marketing approaches primarily relied on the functional and utilitarian attributes of offerings, the foundational work on the experience economy has highlighted a gradual shift toward a logic centered on the customer's lived experience. From this perspective, value no longer resides solely in the service consumed, but in the emotional, sensory, and symbolic quality of the experience that accompanies it. Pine and Gilmore (1999) argue that firms now operate within an *experience economy*, in which consumers primarily seek memorable, immersive, and differentiated experiences.

This transformation has been widely adopted in the field of experiential marketing. Schmitt (1999) proposes a departure from traditional transactional approaches by asserting that the relationship between consumers and offerings is constructed through experiences that simultaneously engage the senses, emotions, cognition, behaviors, and social interactions. This multidimensional view of the customer experience provides a deeper understanding of the growing prominence of experiential leisure activities, such as escape games, which offer not merely entertainment services but holistic experiences engaging consumers on multiple levels simultaneously.

Experiential leisure occupies a particular place in the consumer behavior literature. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) already emphasized that leisure, entertainment, and hedonic consumption activities constitute a privileged context for analyzing the symbolic, emotional, and experiential dimensions of consumption. This perspective was later extended by Arnould and Price (1993), who highlight the extraordinary nature of certain leisure experiences, characterized by escapism, emotional intensity, and the creation of enduring memories.

Within this framework, the customer experience in experiential leisure can be understood as an integrative process involving

cognitive, affective, sensory, and social dimensions. Verhoef et al. (2009) remind us that customer experience results from the totality of interactions between the consumer and the service environment, including communication, the physical setting, human interactions, and the symbolic elements of the offering. This broad approach is particularly relevant for understanding the attraction exerted by escape games, where the experience begins well before actual participation.

The literature identifies a first major determinant: experiential communication. Unlike purely informational communication, it aims to construct an experiential promise and stimulate the consumer's imagination. Schmitt (1999) emphasizes that communication becomes a lever for creating anticipated experiences, capable of arousing the senses, emotions, and curiosity. In the context of immersive leisure, communication contributes to the construction of a symbolic and narrative universe that precedes the act of consumption.

This dimension is all the more important as recent literature shows that customer experience often begins in the pre-consumption phase. Gentile et al. (2007) explain that anticipation plays a central role in shaping attraction, as it enables consumers to mentally project themselves into the expected experience. Promotional visuals, scripted narratives, suspenseful messages, and emotional cues thus foster the formation of positive expectations and strengthen participation intentions. In escape games, such communication already lays the groundwork for immersion by activating prior cognitive projection.

A second essential theoretical foundation lies in the appropriation of the experience. The work of Carù and Cova (2003) is particularly influential in this regard. The authors show that an experience becomes fully meaningful only when it can be symbolically appropriated by the consumer. Appropriation refers to the individual's ability to become familiar with the codes of the experience, understand its logic, and attribute personal meaning to it.

In the context of immersive leisure, this appropriation translates into the consumer's ability to project themselves into the scenario, identify with the proposed role, and internalize the narrative codes of the experience. The more the proposed universe aligns with their

cultural references, preferences, and imaginaries, the stronger the attraction is likely to be. This logic directly relates to the notion of symbolic familiarity, widely mobilized in experiential consumption research.

The third theoretical pillar is immersion. Immersion is now considered one of the most structuring dimensions of customer experience in experiential leisure. Pine and Gilmore (1999) identify it as a fundamental dimension of memorable experiences, as opposed to mere absorption. While absorption captures the consumer's attention, immersion implies a much deeper level of involvement, in which the individual becomes an integral part of the experience.

This perspective is further supported by the theory of *flow* developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), according to which optimal experience is characterized by a state of total absorption, intense concentration, and a loss of temporal awareness. In immersive leisure contexts, this dimension is essential, as it reflects the offering's capacity to create a temporary break from everyday life.

Recent literature on experiential attractions and immersive environments also shows that immersion strongly depends on what Mossberg (2007) refers to as the *experiencescape*, that is, the overall environment in which the experience unfolds: décor, soundscape, human interactions, objects, pacing, and narrative.

In escape games, this logic is particularly evident. The scenographed setting, time constraints, player interactions, puzzle mechanisms, and narrative tension jointly contribute to the creation of a highly immersive experience. Consumer attraction therefore depends not only on the game concept itself but also on the promise of intense immersion and a memorable experience.

In light of these theoretical foundations, the literature converges toward the idea that experiential communication, appropriation, and immersion constitute the main theoretical determinants of attraction in immersive leisure, particularly in the context of escape games. This theoretical synthesis provides the basis for the conceptual model developed in the remainder of this article.

2. Theoretical Discussion of Experiential Dimensions and Proposal of an Explanatory Framework

The analysis of the theoretical foundations of customer experience in experiential leisure highlights the structuring role of several complementary dimensions, notably experiential communication, appropriation, and immersion. However, beyond their isolated identification, the key issue lies in understanding their articulation and their combined contribution to explaining consumer attraction. Indeed, the experiential marketing literature emphasizes that perceived value does not stem from a single factor, but from a global and holistic process integrating multiple cognitive, affective, and sensory dimensions of the experience (Gentile et al., 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

From this perspective, experiential communication can be considered the entry point of the attraction process. It operates upstream of the experience by contributing to the formation of expectations and the construction of an experiential promise. Schmitt (1999) argues that communication must simultaneously activate consumers' sensory, affective, and cognitive dimensions in order to generate an integrated experiential response. This view is reinforced by Brakus et al. (2009), who demonstrate that marketing stimuli directly influence the perception of brand experience.

The work of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) confirms that consumption involves a hedonic dimension grounded in emotions and imagination, which is particularly relevant in immersive leisure contexts. In escape games, narrative, visual, and emotional elements stimulate curiosity and foster an initial form of engagement through the anticipation of the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Tussyadiah & Park, 2018). Thus, communication no longer merely informs but acts as a powerful lever for creating desire and mental projection. In Francophone research, Carù and Cova (2003, 2007) also emphasize the role of experiential staging in the creation of meaning for consumers, which is particularly relevant in cultural and leisure industries. In the Moroccan context, several studies in tourism marketing and consumer behavior highlight the importance of emotional and narrative communication in enhancing the attractiveness of leisure experiences and destinations (El

Amrani & El Khatib, 2019; Berrada & El Youssoufi, 2021), particularly within emerging cultural and immersive offerings.

However, this anticipation must be extended through a process of appropriation, allowing consumers to transform initial interest into a more personal and meaningful projection. Carù and Cova (2003) define appropriation as the individual's ability to symbolically invest an experience by attributing personal meaning to it. This process relies on cultural familiarity, narrative references, and the capacity for identity projection.

In this sense, appropriation can be interpreted as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty and increasing perceived relevance (Filser, 2002). Holbrook (2006) further argues that experiential value strongly depends on the consumer's ability to integrate the experience into their personal symbolic universe.

In escape games, appropriation is facilitated by scenarios inspired by popular cultural references (films, video games, historical narratives), which enhance identity projection and cognitive familiarity. In Moroccan experiential consumption contexts (events, urban leisure, cultural tourism), several studies also show that cultural proximity and symbolic recognition of the proposed universes strengthen consumer engagement (Amzil & Oubdi, 2020; Hajjami, 2022).

Moreover, immersion emerges as a central dimension in consolidating this experiential process. It corresponds to a state of cognitive and emotional absorption in which the individual is fully engaged in the experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Pine and Gilmore (1999) identify immersion as a key dimension of memorable experiences, particularly in environments where the consumer becomes an active participant.

This perspective is complemented by Mossberg (2007), who introduces the concept of the *experiencescape*, highlighting the role of the overall environment (physical, sensory, and social) in creating immersive experiences. Similarly, Pine and Gilmore (2011) emphasize that experiential value increases with the degree of active consumer participation.

In the case of escape games, immersion relies on the combination of several elements: scenarization, narrative coherence, sensory stimulation, social cooperation, and time constraints. Nicholson (2015) and Wiemker et al. (2015) show that such settings foster total

player engagement, akin to the *flow* state described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

Furthermore, recent literature on digital and immersive experiences (Beckman et al., 2018; Tussyadiah & Wang, 2016) demonstrates that immersion is not only experienced but also anticipated, thereby constituting a key driver of attraction.

The articulation of these dimensions enables a processual reading of attraction. Experiential communication acts as a trigger by generating interest and curiosity. Appropriation transforms this interest into identity projection and personal meaning. Immersion, in turn, enhances the desirability of the experience by promising deep and emotional engagement.

This dynamic follows a cumulative and interconnected logic, in which each dimension reinforces the effects of the others. It aligns with the work of Lemon and Verhoef (2016), who conceptualize customer experience as a dynamic process involving multiple interdependent stages.

From this perspective, consumer attraction can be defined as the result of an anticipatory evaluation process of the experience, based on the combination of these experiential dimensions. It depends less on the objective characteristics of the offering than on how it is perceived, imagined, and internalized by the consumer.

This view is consistent with contemporary approaches to consumer behavior, which emphasize the subjective, emotional, and co-constructed nature of value (Holbrook, 2006; Verhoef et al., 2009).

On this basis, it is possible to propose an integrative explanatory framework in which experiential communication, appropriation, and immersion exert a positive and complementary influence on consumer attraction in escape games. This framework constitutes the theoretical foundation of the conceptual model presented in the following section.

3. Development of the Conceptual Model of Attraction in Escape Games

The analysis of theoretical contributions from experiential marketing and consumer behavior makes it possible to structure an integrated explanatory framework of attraction in the context of escape games. This attraction cannot be reduced to a simple reaction to a leisure offering; rather, it results from an

anticipatory evaluation process in which the consumer constructs expectations, mobilizes imagination, and projects a potential lived experience. From this perspective, the experiential dimensions identified in the literature; communication, appropriation, and immersion emerge as complementary levers contributing to the formation of this attraction. Experiential communication constitutes a fundamental entry point in this process. By mobilizing narrative, visual, and emotional elements, it contributes to the construction of an experiential promise capable of capturing the consumer's attention and stimulating interest. In line with Schmitt (1999), such communication activates sensory and affective dimensions, thereby fostering the formation of positive expectations. In the context of escape games, the staging of scenarios, the use of suspense, and the valorization of the lived experience contribute to creating anticipation that goes beyond mere information and enters a logic of desire. Attraction thus finds its initial source in the capacity of communication to make the experience exist in the consumer's mind even before participation.

However, this anticipation alone is not sufficient to fully explain attraction. It is embedded within a broader dynamic in which the consumer must be able to appropriate the proposed experience. Appropriation, as conceptualized by Carù and Cova (2003), refers to the individual's ability to symbolically invest in an experience by attributing personal meaning to it. In escape games, this dimension manifests through the possibility of projecting oneself into a role, identifying with a narrative universe, or recognizing familiar cultural references. The more this projection is facilitated, the more the experience appears relevant and accessible, thereby strengthening attraction. Appropriation thus acts as a mechanism that transforms initial interest into a deeper form of engagement.

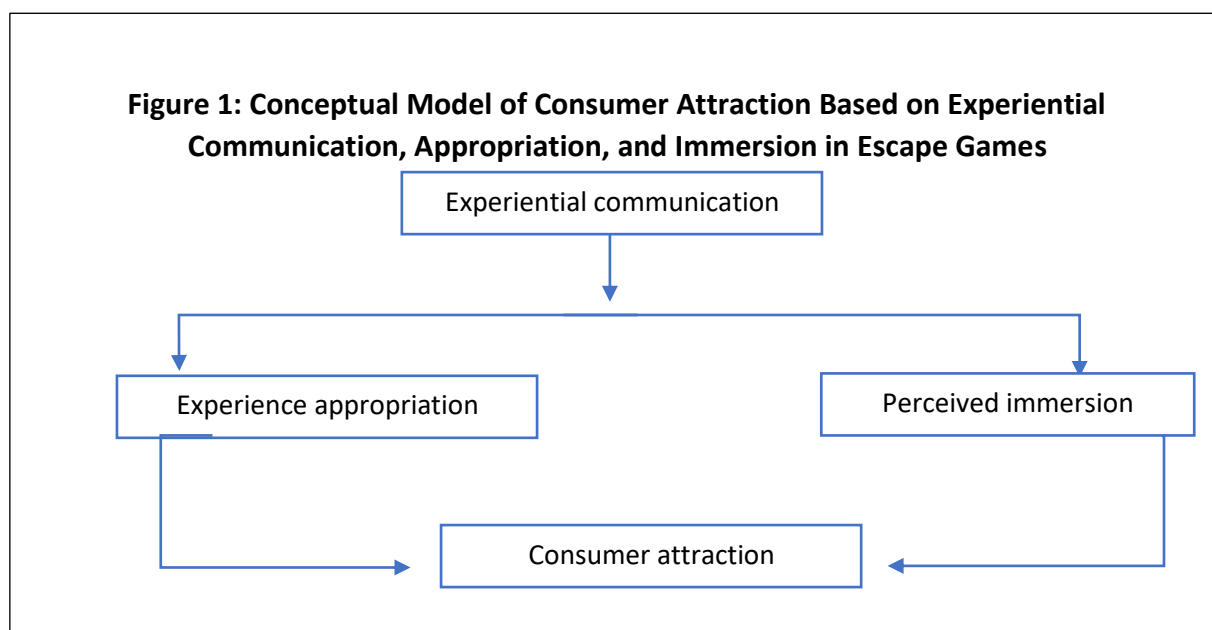
At the same time, immersion constitutes a central dimension in consolidating this process. It refers to a state of cognitive and emotional absorption in which the consumer is fully engaged in the experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Following Pine and Gilmore (1999), immersion can be considered

a key component of experiential value, particularly in contexts where the consumer becomes an active participant. In escape games, immersion is enabled by the coherence of the settings, the richness of the narrative, time pressure, and social interactions. However, beyond the lived experience, it is the anticipated perception of immersion that plays a decisive role in attraction. The promise of an intense, engaging, and immersive experience constitutes in itself a motivating factor, as it responds to the need for escapism and a break from everyday life.

The articulation of these dimensions reveals a processual logic of attraction. Experiential communication initiates the process by generating curiosity and constructing a positive representation of the experience. Appropriation then allows the consumer to identify with this representation and assign personal meaning to it, while immersion enhances the desirability of the experience by promising deep engagement and emotional intensity. These dimensions do not operate in isolation but are part of a cumulative dynamic in which each reinforces the effects of the others.

From this perspective, consumer attraction can be understood as the result of a cognitive and emotional construction based on the combination of these experiential dimensions. It depends less on the objective characteristics of the offering than on how it is perceived, interpreted, and anticipated by the consumer. This conceptual framework thus provides an integrated reading of the mechanisms underlying attraction in escape games and offers a solid basis for future empirical investigations.

In what follows, an integrative conceptual model is presented to synthesize the main theoretical contributions discussed above. The model adopts a processual perspective on attraction in escape games, in which experiential communication acts as the entry point of the process, appropriation as a mechanism of meaning construction, and immersion as an intensifier of the perceived experience. Attraction therefore results from the dynamic interaction between these experiential dimensions.



Conclusion

In light of the theoretical developments presented, this article proposes a conceptual framework aimed at explaining consumer attraction in the context of escape games, drawing on insights from experiential marketing and consumer behavior. The literature analysis highlights the structuring role of experiential communication, experience appropriation, and immersion in shaping this attraction. The latter cannot be reduced to an immediate reaction to the offering but rather unfolds as an anticipatory construction process, in which the consumer mobilizes representations, expectations, and projections related to the experience.

The articulation of these dimensions allows for an integrated reading of the mechanisms underlying attraction, particularly emphasizing the importance of pre-experiential phases in the formation of participation desire. In this sense, this work contributes to enriching the literature by highlighting the central role of cognitive, emotional, and symbolic processes in immersive environments.

From a theoretical standpoint, this article provides a structured framework that can guide future research, particularly with a view to empirically testing the relationships identified. From a managerial perspective, it underscores the importance for industry practitioners of designing coherent experiences capable of articulating communication, symbolic

projection, and immersion in order to enhance the attractiveness of their offerings.

Finally, this conceptual framework could be extended to other forms of experiential consumption, thereby opening new avenues for studying engagement dynamics in contemporary experiences.

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