



The organised walking event
along the St. Declan's Way,
Ireland:
The tourist journey from an
experiential perspective

Master Thesis Cultural Geography

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Declaration of own work

I hereby declare that this dissertation on the organised walking events along the St. Declan's Way, Ireland: The tourist journey from an experiential perspective is my own original work. I wrote this research without any help from others, nor did I commit plagiarism by copying data and results from other studies. This work is submitted at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen in relation to the study: Cultural Geography. This dissertation has not been published for any other study, diploma, or degree at another university.

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Abstract

This research focuses on the St. Declan's Way. A 115-km long pilgrimage trail located in County Tipperary and County Waterford, Ireland. The re-opening of the St. Declan's Way, which started in 2012, became a successful bottom-up initiative supported by local voluntary groups, regional tourism organisations and state funding departments. However, from web research, it was found that there is no documentation on the tourist experience they want to create and provide.

From the literature, it was established that while many organisations and researchers focus on development guidelines for the enhancement of pilgrimage tourism, none of these online guidelines emphasise on customer experience management (Nouch & Bradley, 2018; UNWTO, 2019; Bausch, Schröder, & Gunya, 2020). In other words, there is a lack of a customer-centric development approach. The destinations provide a service to the tourist with the tourist being relatively passive (Norton & Pine, 2013; McColl-Kennedy, et al., 2015). Moreover, almost no research has been conducted regarding the customer experience on pilgrimage routes. The articles that were found did not compare the actual with the planned tourist journey (Forlani, Ferrucci, & Picciotti, 2021).

This research therefore aimed to identify how the tourist journey from an experiential approach can contribute to the improvement of the planned tourist experience along the St. Declan's Way. This research was written from an experiential approach in which the researcher fully participated in the walking events of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th stages of the St. Declan's Way. To rightfully document the actual tourist journey, participant observation was applied in which the researcher described and analysed her own personal experience using an experience diary and the ServQual method. Moreover, three semi-structured interviews were held with volunteers involved in KMDA and the Steering Committee to gather data on the planned tourist journey. The most important gaps identified in the tourist experience were related to transportation, accommodation, information provision at cultural artefacts, check-in location of the event, and social media presence. Most of these missing touchpoints were also identified by the KMDA and the Steering Committee. From the interviews, it was established that the organisations have difficulty overcoming these issues as there is no funding available. This research therefore proposes different budget-efficient solutions.

Key words: pilgrimage routes, tourist experience, customer journey mapping, touchpoints

Word count: from introduction to conclusion and recommendations 10662 words

Table of Contents

Declaration of own work.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
List of figures.....	5
1.Introduction.....	6
2.Literature review.....	10
2.1 Customer experience.....	10
2.2 Components of a tourist experience.....	11
2.1.1. Destination image based on the 5A's.....	12
2.2.2. Tourist expectation and satisfaction.....	13
2.3 Tourist journey mapping.....	14
3.Methodology.....	17
3.1 Conceptual Framework.....	17
3.2 Data collection.....	18
3.3 Data analysis.....	20
3.4 Research Rigour.....	20
3.5 Ethical issues, considerations, and positionality.....	21
4. Analysis.....	23
4.1 Planned tourist experience.....	24
4.2 Actual tourist journey.....	26
4.3 Gaps in tourist experience.....	31
5. Discussion.....	36
6. Conclusion and recommendations.....	38
7.Reference List.....	41
8.Appendices.....	45
Appendix 5.1: Interview guide.....	45
Appendix 5.2: Experience Diary.....	48
5.2.1 Positionality of the researcher.....	48
5.2.2 Experience diary stage 3.....	50
5.2.3 Influence tourist journey of stage 3 on stage 4 and 5.....	67

5.2.4 Experience diary stage 4 and 5	68
Appendix 5.3: ServQual Assessment Form	81
5.3.1 ServQual framework actual experience stage 3	82
5.3.2 ServQual framework actual experience stage 4 and 5	84
Appendix 5.4: Consent form	87
Appendix 5.5: Categorization of touchpoints and their channels	89
Appendix 5.6: Coding stages	91

List of figures

Figure 1: Map St Declan’s Way

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Figure 3: Map stage 3, 4, and 5

Figure 4: Details on the interviews

Figure 5: Legend tourist journey maps

Figure 6: Planned tourist journey

Figure 7: Pre-experience stage actual tourist journey 1

Figure 8: Pre-experience stage actual tourist journey 2

Figure 9: Photos of touchpoints

Figure 10: Experience stage actual tourist journey 1

Figure 11: Experience stage actual tourist journey 2

Figure 12: Post-experience stage actual tourist journey 1

Figure 13: Post-experience stage actual tourist journey 2

1.Introduction

Walking tourism is becoming a fast-growing segment of tourism worldwide. This increase in demand started to arise around 2010, and unlike all other tourism-related segments, walking tourism increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Centre for the Promotion of Imports, 2021). The motivation to spend time outside accelerated drastically, as hiking was the only governmental-allowed leisure activity that could take place outside of people's houses. It is expected that some of these hikers will develop a new-found hobby, and as a result, it is estimated that walking tourism will grow by 11.9% between 2019 and 2026 (CBI, 2021; Vijayanand, 2014; UNWTO, 2019). Despite the increase in demand, walking tourism is also an attractive target group for destinations as they have money to spend and are driven by the motivation to obtain an authentic cultural experience (CBI, 2021).

Pilgrim routes are a perfect resource to substantiate this demand since they form a linkage between religious and cultural elements that, independently, would not have been attractive to tourists due to their often rather inaccessible location (Olsen, Trono, & Fidgeon, 2018). This readily available cultural capital does not necessitate major adjustment or investment and is therefore easy to integrate as an asset for the tourism industry. Many destinations identified that capitalization of these cultural elements can result in positive economic impacts as the pristine identity of the marginalized areas encourages tourists to travel to these less visited areas (Timothy & Boyd, 2014).

This potential of pilgrimage routes was also identified by the founders of Knockmealdown Active (KMDA), who, after walking the St. James Way in 2011, believed their residential area, the Knockmealdown Mountain region, had under-exploited natural and cultural capital that could be used as a unique outdoor area for local cyclists, hikers, and anglers and ultimately could result in rural regeneration.

The St. Declan's Way, a 115-kilometre-long pilgrimage trail, was identified as being one of the local resources that combines different cultural assets, reaching from the Rock of Cashel in Cashel to the St. Declan's Cathedral in Ardmore. The route is a combination of several ancient pilgrimage routes and is suitable for both hikers and cyclers (South Tipperary Tourism Company , 2011; Saint Declan's Way, 2022a).

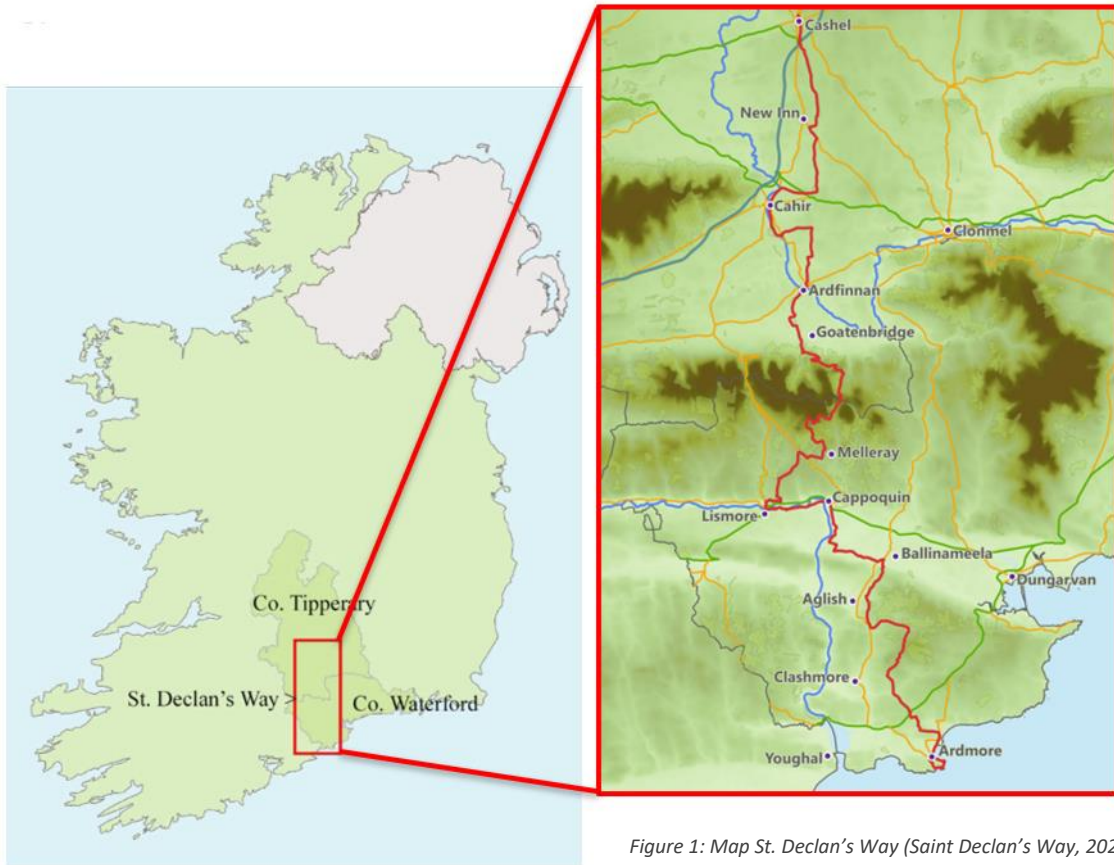


Figure 1: Map St. Declan's Way (Saint Declan's Way, 2022b)

From 2012 onwards, KMDA started to organise annual walking events. The route at that time was only historically documented; the route was in bad condition, and maps, signage, and information boards were not available. The rise in demand and interest in the St. Declan's Way over the past years resulted in the setup of the St. Declan's Steering Committee. This organisation managed to attract the funding needed for trail restoration, maintenance, signposting, maps, and information boards. The route officially opened in 2021 (Saint Declan's Way, 2022a).

The re-opening of the St. Declan's Way became a successful bottom-up initiative supported by local voluntary groups, regional tourism organisations and state funding departments. To ensure sustainable development and incorporation of the St. Declan's Way in the Knockmealdown Mountain region, the Steering Committee focusses on community collaboration, partnership, transport, accommodation, and cultural heritage. Despite that, from web research, it was found that there is no documentation on the tourist experience they want to create and provide. Additionally, there is no clear identification of the

target group and their demand found, nor is there focus on how the newly incorporated tourist activities, such as the St. Declan's Way, are perceived by tourists.

The need for a sustainable bottom-up approach in the augmentation of walking tourism is also identified by other researchers and tourism organisations including the UNWTO (2019), Bausch, Schröder & Gunya (2020) and by Green Pilgrimage Interreg Europe (2018), who all proposed development guidelines for the enhancement of pilgrimage tourism. However, like the St. Declan's Way, it is identified that none of these online guidelines emphasize on customer experience management (Nouch & Bradley, 2018; UNWTO, 2019; Bausch, Schröder, & Gunya, 2020). In other words, there is a lack of customer-centric development approach. The destinations provide a service to the tourist with the customer being relatively passive (Norton & Pine, 2013; McColl-Kennedy, et al., 2015). This poses a potential threat to the success of the destination development plan, as knowing the customer experience is key to the survival of any tourism initiative. In this rapidly globalizing, experience-driven world, consumers have more options than ever before. To achieve a competitive advantage, a company should ensure that the supply of their services is in alignment with the demand of the consumer. Tourists that are buying a service are not solely seeking a good product at an affordable price, they expect the service provider to deliver a series of personal, insightful, and relevant services that meet their requirements. When this demand is not met, the destination marketing strategy will not work (Hsieh & Chuang, 2019; Wereda & Grzybowska, 2016).

Regardless of the importance of customer experience management, almost no research has been conducted regarding the customer experience on pilgrimage routes. Out of all the volumes and editions of the Annual Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage, solely one article focused on mapping the customer experience along different pilgrimage routes in Italy. Nevertheless, the actual perceived customer experience was not compared or linked back to the planned customer experience (Forlani, Ferrucci, & Picciotti, 2021). Additionally, a couple of sources state the importance of customer journey mapping in pilgrimage tourism (Nouch & Bradley, 2018; Wiltshier & Griffiths, 2016). Looking at the broader scope, several bachelor theses were found that researched the difference between the actual and the planned customer journeys along walking routes (Gervasoni, 2018; Hartog, van Slooten, & Weusthof, 2021). Other sources found focus on the main dimensions and attributes that shape the experiences of walking tourists, including their motives, behaviours and perceived destination image (Zhang, Labajo, Ramos, & del Valle-Brena, 2021), satisfaction (Vliet & Van, 2021; Cerutti & Piva, 2016), revisiting-intention (Vliet & Van, 2021), walking as self-therapy (Jørgensen, Eade, Ekeland, & Lorentzen,

2020) but does not include experience mapping nor comparison between planned and actual customer journeys.

Contributing to this gap in research, no prior research has been conducted regarding St. Declan's Way. This resulted in the following research question: *'How can the tourist journey from an experiential approach, contribute to the improvement of the planned tourist experience along the St. Declan's Way, Ireland?'* To answer this research question, the following sub-questions were identified:

1. Which touchpoints are included in the planned tourist journey of the organised walking event from the perspective of KMDA and the Steering Committee?
2. Which touchpoints are experienced in the actual tourist journey of the organised walking event along the St. Declan's Way?
3. To what extent do the planned and actual tourist experiences correspond?
4. Which missing touchpoints should be included in the tourist journey?

This research has both societal as well as academic relevance. As established in the previous section, the topic of customer experience regarding pilgrimage trails has not yet been researched. Therefore, this research could potentially form a knowledge baseline. Moreover, this research is of value to KMDA, the Steering Committee as well as local community groups involved in the trail who can use the recommendations regarding the gap between actual and planned customer journeys to improve the experience of the St. Declan's Way. This will not only improve their competitive advantage but will also ensure a positive increase in economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts. This research will also raise awareness of the existence of the St. Declan's Way. Moreover, this research can be applied to other pilgrimage and walking routes across the globe.

2.Literature review

2.1 Customer experience

Creating high-quality services and a strong customer experience has become the main priority in many service-related industries, including tourism (Hwang & Seo, 2016). This reorientation finds its nature in the increasing demand for personalisation (Hwang & Seo, 2016; Mahrous & Hassan, 2017; Halvaorsrud, Kvale, & Følstad, 2016). As a result, tourism-related businesses began to recognise that the traditional marketing strategy based on product, price, and quality no longer served as the primary drivers of competitive advantage and customer loyalty (Hwang & Seo, 2016). Similarly, Hsieh and Chuang (2019) established that the inclusion of customer experience management in the company's strategy is a useful operational activity to not only focus on the quality of the service provided, but also put emphasis on the provision of a positive and emotionally satisfying experience. Customer experience management does not only result in competitive advantage but also increases in revenue and decreases in customer fluctuation (Wereda & Grzybowska, 2016; Mahrous & Hassan, 2017).

Customer experience has been a widely discussed concept for decades (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The customer experience terminology was first used in the mid-1950s. During that time, it was identified for the first time that people do not desire to buy products; they desire to obtain a satisfying experience (Abbott, 1955). In the 1980s, the concept of customer experience was broadened as experiential theorists recognised the importance of cognition. The desire to obtain an experience is driven by thoughts, memories, imagination, and the mind (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). Furthering that definition, in the current day, customer experience is seen as a cognitive and emotion-driven desire. However, customer experience is a liquid concept as the definition varies across different disciplines and through time (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Meyer and Schwager (2007) interpret customer experience as a subjective and internal behaviour that customers develop throughout their exposure to direct and indirect contact with a firm. The definitions of researchers like Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) and Pine & Gilmore (1998) are more centred around the components that create a customer experience. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) identify that customer experience is based on social, behavioural, sensorial, emotional, and cognitive factors. Similarly, Barkus, Smitt, and Zarantonello (2009) describe customer experience as an intrinsic customer response based on

cognition, sensations, and feelings that are evoked based on a brand's identity, communication, and design but also the external environment.

When these definitions are compared to one another, it is discovered that many definitions describe the customer experience without touching on the components that create the customer experience (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Moreover, many definitions are not specifically altered or in alignment with the specific field of research (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Furthermore, it was identified that many definitions focus on the atomistic aspects of customer experience provision. With this, the definition implies that the experienced good or service is provided by one firm or company. Only a handful of researchers approach customer experience from a holistic point of view (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Page & Connell, 2014).

In this research, tourist experience is used instead of customer experience and stands for the personal and intrinsic response that customers develop and express during interaction with a product or service. This response is based on emotions, memories, thoughts, and imagination and arises and accumulates throughout all touchpoints of a holistic sales cycle.

2.2 Components of a tourist experience

Likewise, as the definition, the factors influencing the tourist experience have been widely researched and many different components across different fields have been identified. The most frequently listed components across fields are the affective, cognitive, conative, and sensorial components of an experience (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). When focusing on the field of tourism, researchers like Otto and Ritchie (2000) and Beeho and Prentice (1997) stated the complexity of researching the tourist experience, as experiences are not only subjective, based on their own cognitive views and perceptions, but a tourism experience is also holistic in nature. Each holiday or (day)trip is comprised of a flow of different experiences, often provided by different actors from different organisations in different fields. Making it difficult to establish a single framework that addresses all the factors that influence a tourism experience (Page & Connell, 2014).

This finding is supported by the number of frameworks established to analyse the factors that are influencing the tourist experience. Beeho & Prentice (1997) developed the ASEB framework, which is a

combination of a destination's resources and the intrinsic nature of an experience as it focuses on activities, settings, experience, and benefit. Other researchers described the components of a tourist experience based on the 4E's of an experience economy, namely entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics (Zhang, Song, & Park, 2016). Forlani, Ferrucci, and Picciotti (2021) are of the opinion that tourist experiences are solely impacted by the external influences of a destination, such as its attractions, amenities, accessibility, atmosphere, and attitude. A tourist destinations can also be defined as a collection of services and activities (such as hotels and attractions) that contribute to a visitor's overall impression of the place. Tourist experience is created by a combination of tangible and intangible indicators provided by destinations (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). Urry and Larsen (2011), amongst others, focus on the multisensory dimensions of a tourist experience, in which a tourist experience is drawn on both the aesthetics of a destination and the role of smellscapes, soundscapes, tastescapes, and waterscapes; the multisensory dimension of the tourism experience (Dann & Dann, 2012; Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2010; Kastenholtz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012).

While previous research conducted at different sites amongst different tourist groups illustrates that a tourist experience can be comprised of numerous different aspects, a pattern was found in the overarching themes. Many of the researchers focused on the external aspects of a destination, including aesthetics, facilities, amenities, etc., as well as the intrinsic perception of tourists, which had an overhand in literature. It is therefore chosen to base the tourist experience along the St. Declan's Way on the destination image and the tourists' perception and satisfaction.

2.1.1. Destination image based on the 5A's

In alignment with Forlani, Ferrucci, and Picciotti (2021) and Cetin and Bilgihan (2016), it was chosen to research the factors influencing a tourist experience from tangible and intangible aspects of a destination. Destinations are considered the core of a tourist product. Tourist destinations can be defined as a collection of services and activities that contribute to a visitor's overall impression of the place. Tourists' spatial experience context is created by a combination of observable and intangible indications provided by destinations (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). The resources of a destination included in the marketing strategy influence the expectations tourists have before their arrival at the destination, along with the way in which tourists construct their image of a place. Therefore, the way in which a destination portrays itself influences the way in which a tourist evaluates their experience (Page & Connell, 2014).

The 5A model is one of the most frequently applied tools to analyse the resources present at a destination. In this model, the focus is laid on attractions, accessibility, accommodations, amenities, and activities (Reitsamer, Brunner-Sperdin, & Stockburger-Sauer, 2016; Forlani, Ferrucci, & Picciotti, 2021). Attractions are considered the most important element that attracts tourists to a destination. Attractions include all the aspects a tourist likes to undertake during their trip. Attractions range from cultural, archaeological, and historic sites to festivals, sports events, and zoological parks. Attractions can be of both natural and man-made nature. Accessibility refers to the ability to reach a destination by land, sea, or air in a comfortable, dependable, and appropriate manner. The third component is accommodation. This includes any building in which a person can reside. Amenities relate to facilities and services, both natural and man-made, that complement the attraction. Examples of this include a local police station, ATMs, hospitals, telephone service, WiFi, roads, sewage system, etc. Lastly, activities are leisure-related undertakings that can be done at the attraction (BTMC, 2022; Forlani, Ferrucci, & Picciotti, 2021).

Applied to this study, factors assessed during the tourist experience of the St. Declan's Way are all natural and man-made attractions, accommodations, and amenities that can be found within 1 kilometre of the St. Declan's Way. Moreover, accessibility plays an important role as the St. Declan's Way is in an underdeveloped, marginalised area. Focus will be placed on the ability to reach the trail by using public transportation. Additionally, the maintenance and accessibility of the trail itself will be considered. Lastly, the activities found at the identified attractions are studied and reported.

2.2.2. Tourist expectation and satisfaction

The tourists' interpretations of a location are also influenced by subjective and intrinsic cognition. Consequently, expectations, perceptions, and satisfaction play an important role. To create a positive tourist experience, the expectations of the service provided should be met, preferably be exceeded, to obtain tourist satisfaction. Quality, service delivery, and meeting tourist expectations are well-established and critical aspects of in the tourism industry (Page & Connell, 2014).

One of the most well-known and frequently used tools to assess quality and tourist satisfaction is the ServQual method, established by Parasuraman et al. (1985). This framework is designed to breach the perception-expectation gap present (Page & Connell, 2014). The ServQual, method assesses the difference between tourist expectations and tourist satisfaction using a 22 item likers-scale related to five main components (appendix 5.3). The first component, reliability, indicates the ability of the service

provider to deliver the promised service in an accurate manner. Responsiveness is the willingness of the service provider to answer questions, provide guidance, and help tourists where needed. Assurance relates to the knowledge, civility, as well as the capability of the employees to establish a trustworthy relationship. Empathy describes the individual attention given to each tourist and the personalization of the service provided. Lastly, tangibles relate to the external, physical facilities, amenities, equipment, but also the appearance and representation of staff incorporated in the experience (Izogo, 2013; Parasuraman, Zeithalm, & Berry, 1994; Page & Connell, 2014).

The ServQual method is a suitable framework to assess the tourist perception and satisfaction of the St. Declan's Way because this tool is universally applicable. Moreover, the framework can be modified to the sector and service provider researched and is easy to apply (Kowalska & Ostrega, 2020).

2.3 Tourist journey mapping

As previously established, a tourist experience is the personal and intrinsic response that a person develops and expresses during interaction with a product or service. This response occurs on every occasion when the tourist encounters the company or service provider. These contact moments, in which an interaction occurs, are known as touchpoints (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). Touchpoints can be both tangible and intangible, the tourists should be able to encounter the touchpoint, it must involve communication between the service provider and tourists, and it is subject to time (Halvorsrud, Kvale, & Følstad, 2016). To understand the influence of these touchpoints upon the tourist experience tourist journey mapping is applied. This framework is a visual representation of all interactions throughout the entire service delivery process (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Halvorsrud, Kvale, & Følstad, 2016; Rosenbaum, Otolara, & Ramírez, 2016). A tourist journey can also be used to identify the perception-expectation gap present in a tourist experience when a differentiation is made between the planned tourist journey and the actual tourist journey. The planned tourist journey represents the tourist experience from the viewpoint of the service provider. The actual tourist journey relates to the way in which the tourist experiences the planned tourist journey (Halvorsrud, Kvale, & Følstad, 2016; Rawson, Duncan, & Jones, 2013). The actual journey represents the planned touchpoints a tourist did encounter and is therefore identified to be shorter than the planned tourist journey (Halvorsrud, Kvale, & Følstad, 2016).

Tourist journeys are displayed in chronological order, spread over the different stages of the experience. The line-up of these stages can be seen as a horizontal timeline (Rosenbaum, Otalora, & Ramírez, 2016). In the literature, contradictions arise regarding the number of stages involved in a tourist experience. Some researchers claim that the tourist journey comprises of three stages: pre-core service, core service, and post-core service (Voorhees, et al., 2017; Rosenbaum, Otalora, & Ramírez, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Dhebar, 2013). Other researchers identify four stages: search, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Frochot & Batat, 2013). Regarding the St. Declan's Way, it was chosen to apply a tourist journey comprising of three stages because of the holistic nature of the route. Multiple organisations are involved in the tourist experience of St. Declan's Way. Therefore, it is rather difficult to establish a 4-stage tourist journey since the time between search, evaluation, and purchase differs per actor involved. In this research, the pre-experience stage includes the period from when the tourist starts to research the St. Declan's Way as a possible hiking destination up to the moment the tourist leaves his/her house or previous destination to travel to the St. Declan's Way. From this moment, the experience stage starts. This stage finishes when the tourists arrive back home or move on to a different destination. From that moment, the post-experience starts.

Service providers communicate with tourists using channels. Channels are all mediums used by the service provider to try to get into contact with tourists. Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) made a subdivision of seven different touchpoint elements and the channels belonging to them resulting in the following categories: atmospheric, technological, communicative, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction, product interaction. In this research, a list of possible touchpoints that could be encountered during walking the St. Declan's Way are based on those 7 categories and can be found in appendix 5.5. Touchpoints are owned by different actors involved in the creation of the tourist experience. In the literature, four different types of touchpoint owners are identified: (1) brand-owned touchpoints are designed and managed by the company providing the service, (2) partner-owned touchpoints are jointly managed and designed by the company and a partner such as a media firm, (3) customer-owned touchpoints relate to the tourist's decisions on which the business and its partners have no influence, and (4) independent/external touchpoints relate to the touchpoints on which the organisation, its partners, and the tourist do not pose an influence (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

It should be noted that this is a description of touchpoint owners from an atomistic perspective. In this research, the touchpoint owners are approached from a holistic perspective. Therefore, brand-owned

relates to all touchpoints on which KMDA and the Steering Committee have a direct influence. Partner-owned touchpoints include partners of KMDA and the Steering Committee, which are not members but work in close collaboration with the organisations. KMDA and the Steering Committee cannot control these touchpoints. However, they have a great influence on the tourist experience. Tourist-owned touchpoints comprise of all decisions made by tourists and do not pose a great influence on the tourist experience. Independent/external touchpoints are those over which neither the organisations nor the tourist has any control.

3.Methodology

The aim of this research was to identify how the tourist journey from an experiential perspective can contribute to the improvement of the planned tourist experience along the St. Declan’s Way, Ireland. Qualitative methods were used as they explain human environments and social constructs as well as individual experiences (Hay, 2016). This research was written from an experiential approach in which the researcher fully participated in the walking event planned along the St. Declan’s Way. This approach was chosen as it enabled the researcher to first-handily experience, perceive, and assess the challenges KMDA and the steering committee face (Price & Barrell, 1980; Heron, 1981). This research is therefore considered to be of an evaluative nature. To rightfully document the actual tourist journey, participant observation was applied in which the researcher described and analysed her own personal experience of the route

3.1 Conceptual Framework

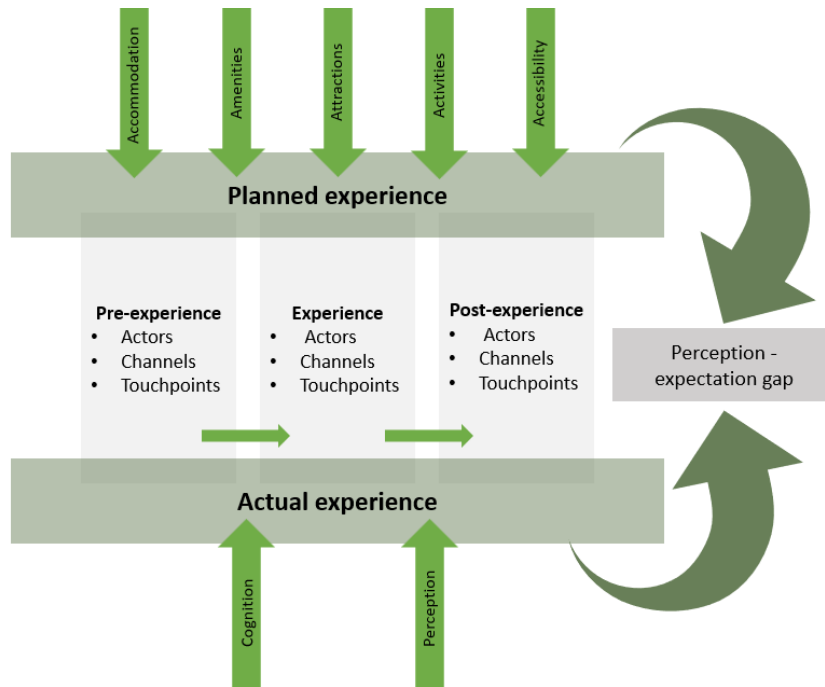


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework in figure 2 illustrates the key concepts retrieved from the literature. This theoretical framework demonstrates that while the actual and planned tourist experience consists of the

same three stages of the tourist journey, it is likely that a difference between both tourist journeys arises. However, what this difference entailed had to be determined.

3.2 Data collection

In this study, a combination of methods was applied to construct both the planned and the actual tourist journey. Firstly, observation was applied to identify the tourist journey from an experiential perspective. In the data collection process, the researcher herself functioned as an observer.



Figure 3: Map stage 3, 4, and 5 (Saint Declan's Way, 2022b)

In total, two tourist journey maps were created. The first round of data collection took place on Saturday, the 16th of April. On that day, the researcher participated in the third stage of the St. Declan's Way from Goatenbridge to Lismore. The hike was 26 km and went through the Knockmealdown Mountains. The second round of data collection took place over the weekend of the 30th of April and the 1st of May. This weekend, KMDA organised a two-day walking event during which the 4th and 5th stages of the St. Declan's Way were walked. Stage 4 started in Lismore and ended in Aglish (21km), and stage 5 started in Aglish and finished in Ardmore (20km).

During the first walking event, the researcher functioned as a complete participant, meaning that the members of KMDA, the Steering Committee, and other community groups were not aware that research was

being conducted. This type of observation allowed the researcher to experience the St. Declan's Way in the same manner as any other tourist would, adding to the credibility of the data since the data was not impacted by members of the organisations (Hay, 2016). Before the second tourist journey took place, the researcher revealed her identity to recruit informants who were involved in KMDA and/or the Steering Committee. This posed a limitation to the research since the second actual tourist experience was

influenced by members of the organisations. Not only was there more email contact, but information about transportation, accommodation, and check-in location that normally would not have been shared was received by the researcher.

It was chosen to create two tourist journeys since the event along stage 3 took place 2 weeks before the events along stages 4 and 5 took place. Therefore, the experience of stage 3 heavily influenced the preparation, expectations, and experience of stages 4 and 5. To overcome this limitation, an in-depth analysis is provided in appendix 5.2.3. Three measures were taken to improve the objectivity of the researcher. Firstly, an experience diary (appendices 5.2.2 and 5.2.4) was applied throughout all stages of the tourist journey. In this diary, the researcher meticulously described the situation in which the touchpoint arose, the stakeholder involved, the touchpoint owner, the channel used, an explanation of the emotions felt, and whether this touchpoint was a peak or valley in the tourist journey. This was ranked using five emoticons. When analysing the data, this diary ensured that the researcher overcame the faultiness of memory as all touchpoints were described in the diary at the moment of occurrence. Critical reflexivity (appendix 5.2.1) was applied in which the researcher constantly reflected on the changes arising within herself and how these affected the research process (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, & Carvativo, 2017). Lastly, the ServQual framework of Parasuraman, Zeithalm, and Berry (1994) was adjusted and applied to this research to systematically analyse whether the tourists' expectations were met, and a level of satisfaction was reached. These measures also added to the credibility and dependability of the research. During the event, photographs were made of touchpoints found along the route. Both the actual and planned tourist journeys are mapped in a visual representation created using PowerPoint.

Secondly, to map the planned consumer experience, semi-structured interviews were held with three members of the organisations involved in the event. The interviews were based on an interview guide in which the interview questions are linked to predefined concepts retrieved from literature (appendix 5.1). The interview questions listed follow a funnel structure, the interviews started with questions that were easy-to-answer to familiarise the informants with the topics. The follow-up questions went more in depth on the topics (Hay, 2016). Semi-structured interviews allowed the informant to introduce topics that were not considered by the researcher (Hay, 2016). This adds to the credibility of the data as it limits the researcher from leading the interview to the pre-established topics.

Non-randomized informant selection was applied as the selection requirement was that the informant be involved in KMDA or the Steering Committee. This type of sampling is known as purposeful non-probability sampling (Hay, 2016; Veal, 2011). During the data collection on site, convenience and snowball sampling were applied. In total, three interviews were held. Two of the informants, Niamh and Frank, were members of both KMDA and the Steering Committee. The third informant, John, is a contractor who is responsible for the PR work for both organisations. Figure 4 shows the details of the interviews.

Interview	Date	Informant	Location	Duration
1	29-04-2022	Niamh	Clancy's Bar & Guesthouse in Tallow	1,5 hours
2	02-05-2022	Combined interview with John and Frank	Bar of Cahir House Hotel	2,5 hours
3	03-05-2022	Frank	In the car to Cork	1 hour

Figure 4: Details on the interviews

3.3 Data analysis

In this research, the thematic coding approach was applied to analyse the data. The researcher transcribed the interviews using Otter.ai, a tool for automating notes from audio recordings. Afterwards, the transcripts were double checked and uploaded to ATLAS.ti. Based on literature and the conceptual model (appendix 5.6), three phases of deductive coding were applied. In the first phase, the researcher includes attributes of the models found in the literature. In the second phase, the codes were structured into seven categories: 1) Destination image; 2) Tourist expectation and satisfaction; 3) Tourist journey; 4) Touchpoint owners; 5) Touchpoint elements; 6) Gaps in the tourist journey; and 7) The organisational structure of the St. Declan's Way. Two were combined in the theme: Components of a tourist experience. The categories three through seven were assembled into the theme: The structure of a holistic tourism journey.

3.4 Research Rigour

To guarantee the reliability and validity of this research, various measures related to research rigour were applied. This chapter will touch upon those that were not discussed in the previous sections. Moreover, the limitations of this research were included to increase the overall transparency.

The trustworthiness and dependability of the data was ensured via the transparency of the research process; the use of other research papers' methods, structures, and approaches that were applied to the data collection and analysis of this research; and the inclusion of the ServQual and experience diary to

systematically record the expectations, experiences, emotions, and satisfaction of the researcher. Adding to that, the questions included in the interview guide were based on concepts retrieved from literature to ensure that the interview results measured what they were supposed to measure.

Additionally, it is difficult to verify the results of qualitative data as they are moment-specific and based on personal interpretation (Hay, 2016). To overcome this limitation, the interview transcriptions and the analysis were forwarded to the informants, providing them with an extra opportunity to identify any misinterpretations of the data. Adjustments were made accordingly to the feedback received from the informants. This increased the credibility and conformability of the results.

Another limitation identified is that due to the timeframe of this master's thesis, it was impossible to participate in the walking events along stages one and two of the St. Declan's Way. These stages are better accessible by public transportation and have a wider range of available accommodation. It is therefore expected that different gaps would have been identified along those two stages.

3.5 Ethical issues, considerations, and positionality

The following precautions were considered to ensure that this research was conducted in an ethical and appropriate manner (Hay, 2016). First, before the interview took place, informants received a consent form that clearly described the purpose of this research, the interview procedure, their voluntary participation, and their right to stop or pause the interview at any time. The interview was only conducted once the informant gave his/her consent (Appendix 5.4).

The privacy and confidentiality of the informant were guaranteed as the interview transcriptions as well as the audio recordings were stored on a password-protected device. Additionally, the names of the informants were replaced by pseudonyms, and personal data that could potentially reveal the identity of the informant was left out of the transcript. The privacy and confidentiality of the volunteers as well as the other hikers met during the primary data collection along the St. Declan's Way were affirmed using the same procedures.

Even though this topic is not considered to be sensitive by nature, possible socio-physiological harm was considered. Before the interview took place, the interview guide was reviewed by the thesis supervisor to

prevent possible harm. Moreover, when signs of discomfort, silence, and overwhelming emotions arose during the interview, the researcher anticipated accordingly.

Moreover, during the data collection of the 3rd stage, the volunteers were not aware that research was being conducted at that moment. This raised ethical questions as the volunteers did not give their consent to being researched. However, as the data collection aimed to identify the type and number of interactions between service provider and tourist, no personal data on the motivation, behaviour, and feelings of the volunteer were collected. This, combined with the respect for their anonymity, minimised this ethical issue.

Lastly, the positionality of the researcher was highly important in the context of this research. The difference in cultural and emotional background, age, and religion influenced the way in which the data was interpreted and analysed (Hay, 2016). Therefore, throughout the research, critical reflexivity was applied in which the researcher constantly revised her positionality towards the research, the informants, as well as towards the St. Declan's Way and documented how her positionality changed throughout the research (Appendix 5.2).

4. Analysis

This chapter will provide insight into the data collected on the actual tourist journey, the planned tourist journey, and the missing touchpoints identified while relating this back to the literature. In alignment with the types of touchpoints identified by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), namely brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and owned by external/independent actors, this research also differentiated touchpoints based on ownership. From the interviews, it was established that KMDA and the Steering Committee are closely linked to the St. Declan's Way. Each organisation oversees different touchpoints, and therefore they are both considered to be brand-owned touchpoints. Partner-owned touchpoints are all companies, amenities, and services that have an established collaboration with KMDA and/or the Steering Committee. Examples retrieved from the interviews are the community halls used during the event; taxi drivers; bus services; and accommodation listed on the website of the St. Declan's Way. Tourist-owned are touchpoints on which only the tourist poses an influence, including posing photos on social media, writing a review on TripAdvisor, and sharing experiences with friends and family. Lastly, external touchpoints are all the touchpoints that do not have a relationship with KMDA or the Steering Committee. These include some of the accommodations along the trail, public transportation services, the airline industry, and some of the artefacts. In the mapped tourist journeys, the different touchpoint owners are shown according to the legend in figure 5.

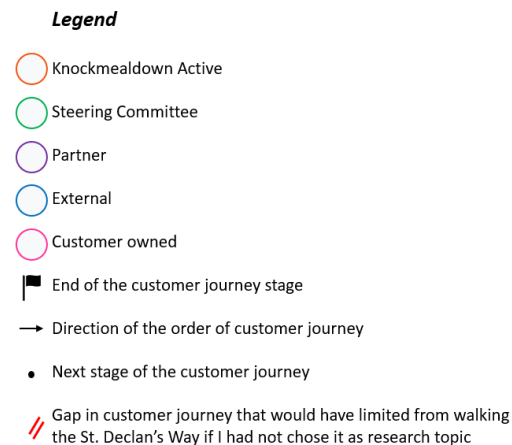


Figure 5: Legend tourist journey maps

4.1 Planned tourist experience

To answer the sub question, 'Which touchpoints are included in the planned tourist journey from the perspective of KMDA and the Steering Committee'. A total of three interviews were held with experts involved in both organisations. From the interviews, it became clear that the two organisations are highly dependent on one another. This is in alignment with Page and Connell (2014), who identified that tourism experiences are holistic in nature and, consequently, are created via the collaboration of multiple different organisations.

"Both organizations depend on each other... The event is an important part of creating the customer experience for the wider trail for the rest of the other 360 days of the year. Why? Because everybody who does not do the event sees the pictures, they read the media... They see what they're missing... So, the event becomes a very important part of triggering the momentum, and triggering the interest amongst the media, amongst the other potential pilgrims. But also, amongst the state." – Niamh, member of Steering Committee

The mutual dependability of the two volunteer organisations was also distinguished in the planned tourist experience. From the interviews, it was proved that the walking event organised by KMDA was built around the overarching tourist journey designed by the Steering Committee. When looking at the planned tourist journey, shown in figure 6, it is recognised that the Steering Committee (Green) is responsible for touchpoints related to four out of five A's from the 5A model to assess the resources that should be present at a destination (Reitsamer, Brunner-Sperdin, & Stockburger-Sauer, 2016; Forlani, Ferrucci, & Picciotti, 2021). Attractions encompass the 6 interpretive panels placed at cultural artefacts related to the St. Declan's Way. Accessibility includes the readiness of the trail, reachability, trail maintenance and preparation. Additionally, effort is made to obtain transportation partners such as local taxi drivers, car hiring services and coach rentals who are interested in being referenced on the St. Declan's website. Concerning accommodation, an attempt is made to find local B&B, Airbnb hosts and guesthouses who are interested in a partnership and are willing to provide their contact details on the website. Lastly, in relation to the amenities, the Steering Committee manages the 300 signs along the route, and the route furniture such as benches, fences, warning signs for busy roads, the pilgrimage passports, digital and printed maps, the distribution of stamps. Furthermore, when the walking event is not taking place, the Steering Committee is amenable with the advertisement of the St. Declan's Way via online platforms and printed documents.

4.1.1 The Steering Committee's planned journey

Related to the planned tourist experience of the walking event, the Steering Committee contributes to the pre-experience and experience stage. The pre-experience comprises 12 touchpoints namely the action taken to raise awareness of the St. Declan's Way as well as the maintenance and trail preparations done to make the trail accessible for the hikers. It can be argued that trail maintenance and preparation, while it is undertaken in the pre-experience stage, belongs to the experience stage as that is the moment when the encounter between tourist and organisation takes place (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the experience stage, 6 tangible touchpoints were mentioned by the Steering Committee including online and printed maps, signage, interpretive panels, trail furniture and warning signs are important contributors to the tourist experience. The Steering Committee stated to not contribute to the post-experience stage as all mouth-to-mouth advertisement and social media posts from tourists are related to the event.

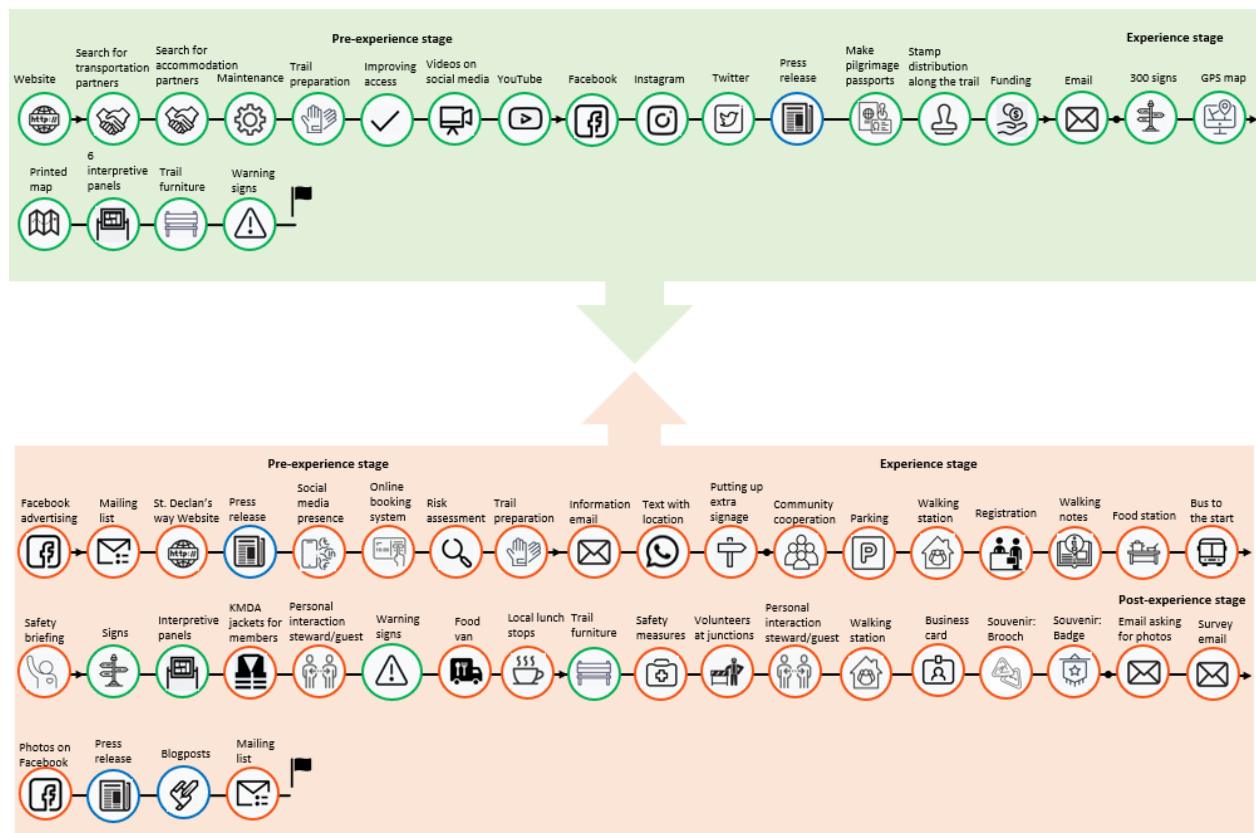


Figure 6: Planned tourist journey

4.1.2 KMDA's planned journey

Looking at the organised event, KMDA makes use of the established touchpoints developed by the Steering Committee since they use the maintained trail, the pilgrimage passports, stamps, online and printed maps, the signposts, the interpretive panels, trail furniture, warning signs and their social media platforms. In figure 6, the event organised by KMDA (Orange) can be seen as the activity category of the

5A model that takes place at the destination. This is because it can be seen as a leisure activity that takes place along the St. Declan's Way, but it is not a direct aspect of it (Reitsamer, Brunner-Sperdin, & Stockburger-Sauer, 2016; Forlani, Ferrucci, & Picciotti, 2021).

As shown in figure 6, the 11 touchpoints found in the pre-experience stage relate to online and printed media presence, trail preparation, online booking, and the provision of detailed information emails about the event. Again, while trail preparation takes place in the pre-experience phase, the encounter between tourist and organisation occurs during the experience stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the experience stage, the 19 touchpoints comprise of registration activities, transportation to route, health and safety measures, provision of food and beverages, souvenirs and personal contact moments between tourist and volunteers. In the post-experience stage members identified that their 6 touchpoints are related to a follow up survey and email request to share photos, social media posts of the photos of the event and adding the participants to the email list for future notice of other events. From the interview it was established that the key focus of the event is on the personalisation and creating a customer centric event.

"It is all very personal. It just makes a difference. So many people have commented on that. It's a sense of community. There's a sense of belonging ... it's not money driven. We hear we actually do care about you, your experience... It is driven by that." – Frank, member of Knockmealdown Active

4.2 Actual tourist journey

This chapter aims to answer sub question two: *'Which touchpoints are experienced in the actual tourist journey of the organised walking event along the St. Declan's Way?'* The answer to this question is based on two actual tourist journeys perceived over the timespan of two weekends. Consequently, the first tourist experience impacted the second tourist experience. The main experiential differences identified were the insecurity regarding the availability of transportation, sorting out accommodation and transportation to the trail, and the researchers' prior expectations. A detailed description can be found in appendix 5.2.

4.2.1 Pre-experience

As can be seen in figure 7, the pre-experience of the first journey touchpoints comprises of 27 touchpoints starting from background research of the St. Declan's Way and the online presence of that trail, booking

tickets, searching for accommodation and transportation, and information emails and texts received from KMDA. When comparing the pre-experience stage of journey one, figure 7 , with journey two, figure 8 , it is found that there is quite a large overlap between the touchpoints encountered from the moment the plane tickets are bought. The difference lies in the destination research phase as that was already accomplished during the first journey and in the additional email contact with members of KMDA and the Steering Committee. Additionally, the pre-experience stage for the second hike encompasses two days of hiking at two different locations. Therefore, this journey is longer, 30 touchpoints, and includes more touchpoints related to accommodation and transportation. In the pre-experience stage of both journeys gaps in the tourist experience were identified. These gaps are relating to the accessibility of the area by public transportation, lack of accommodation availability, lack of information on check-in location and length of the route and the absence of activity on social media platforms other than Facebook. Lastly, as identified in literature, the information a destination includes in its online presence pose an important influence on the way in which the tourist constructs an image of a place and evaluates the experience (Page & Connell, 2014). Figure 7 and 8 shows indications where the researcher lost interest in the St. Declan’s Way and would have chosen another walking route because of accessibility, transportation, and accommodation issues.

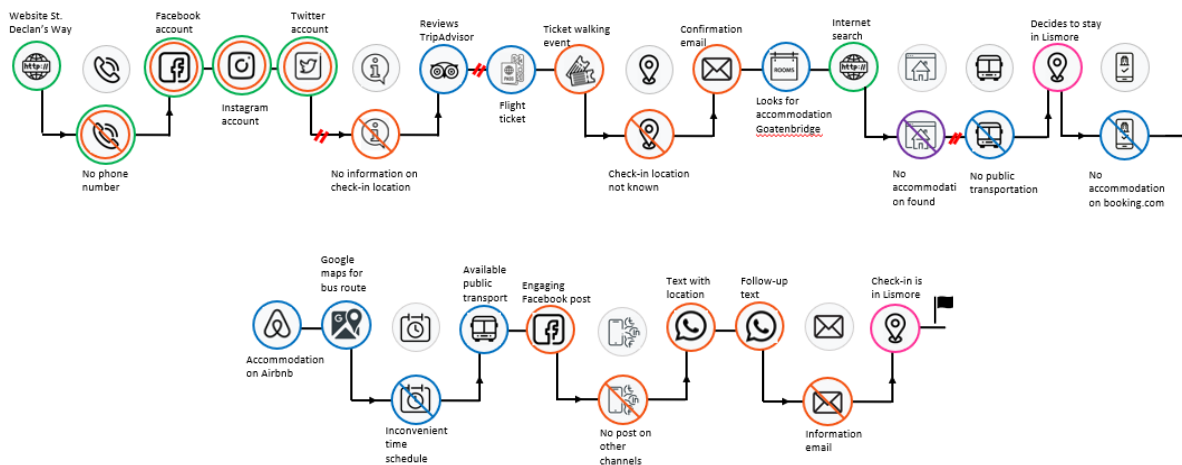


Figure 7: Pre-experience stage actual tourist journey 1

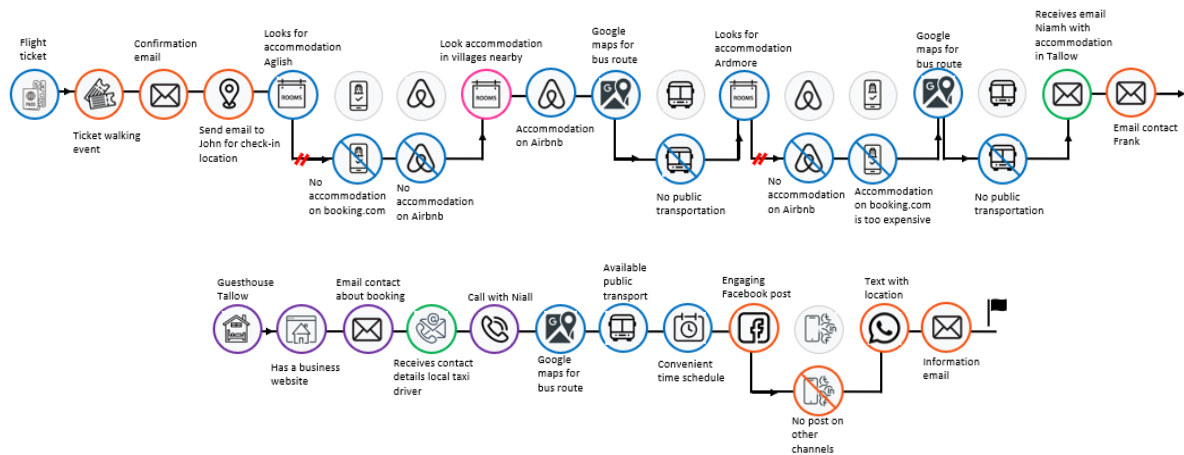


Figure 8: Pre-experience stage actual tourist journey 2

4.2.2 Experience stage

The experience stage of the organised event of stage 3, 4 and 5 were found to be similarly structured (figure 10 and 11). The start of the experience was mainly based on tourist centric decisions such as transportation and accommodation decisions. From the moment the tourist arrived at the community hall there were volunteers present to greet the person and guide them to the check-in. At the check-in the person got registered, received a schedule overview including the biggest cultural artefacts that were present along the route, the pilgrimage passport was stamped, and foods and drinks were provided. Touring busses brought the hikers to the start of the stage and from there on people were free to walk the trail at their own pace. Extra signs were distributed to clarify the directions (figure 9). Along the route many volunteers are present to provide extra guidance, ensure safety, give out food and beverages, and ensured that everybody had a good time. Along the trail at least one stop was made for lunch and at least a couple of cultural artefacts were gazed upon. When the hikers returned to the community centre, they were asked to check-out to register their safe return, the pilgrimage passport was stamped, and tea and sandwiches were provided.

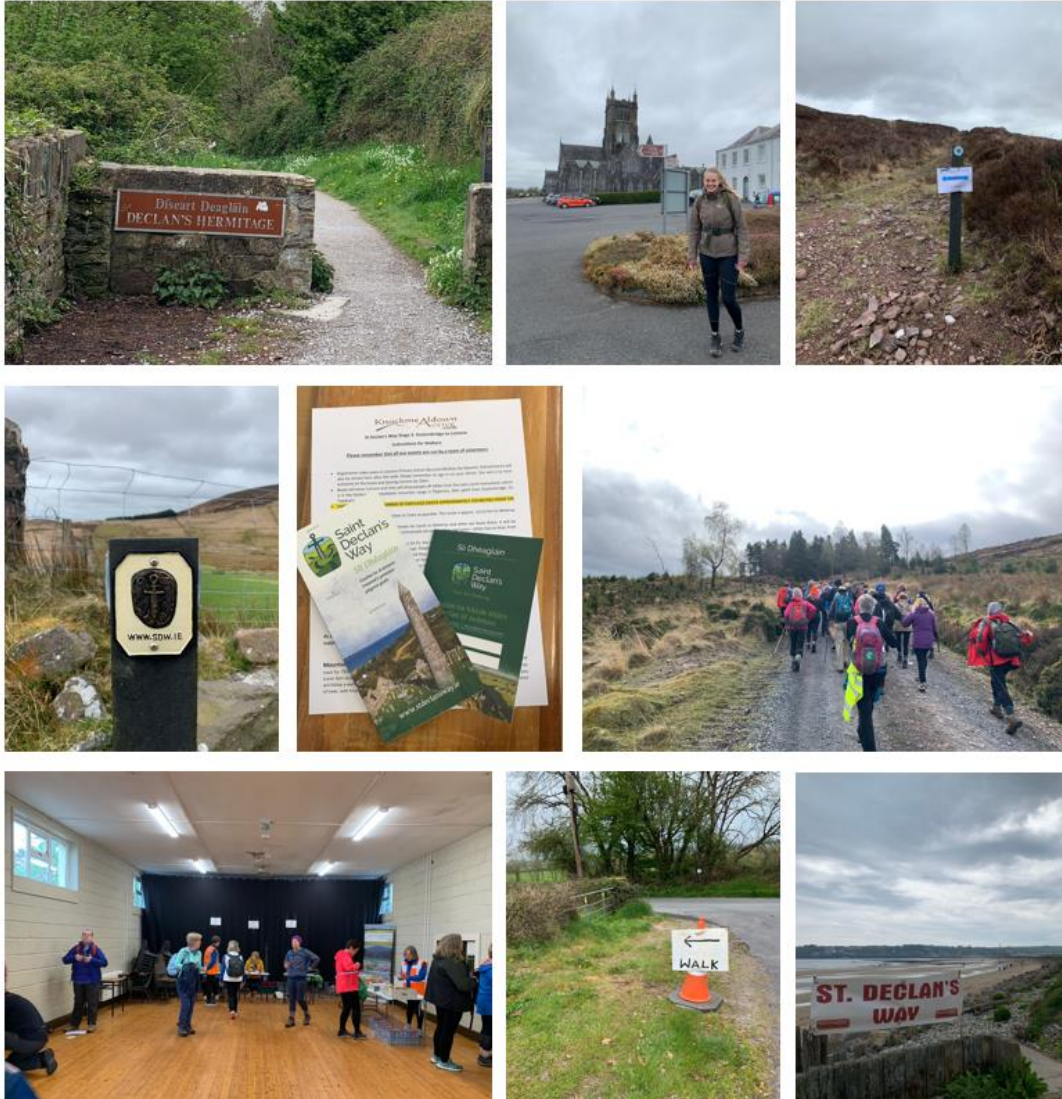


Figure 9: Photos of touchpoints

During the experience stage only a couple of gaps in the tourist experience were identified. These gaps were related to missing informative panels at cultural artefacts as well as that this information was not listed on the walkers' notes. Moreover, in the walking notes of stage three there was an inconsistency with the length of the stage and the researcher's definition of a guided hiking tour was different as it was expected that someone would walk upfront and provide the group with facts and information about the trail. In total it was established that the first experience stage comprised of 46 touchpoints and the second experience stage of 85 touchpoints. The touchpoints listed in the experience stage of the tourist journey are an indication of the of the total amount of touchpoints present at the walk. Many volunteers from an unknown number of community groups were present and each volunteer also moved along the trail,

making it difficult to establish the total amount of touchpoints. These tourist journeys therefore only display the conversations that took place between the researcher and the volunteers.



Figure 10: Experience stage actual tourist journey 1

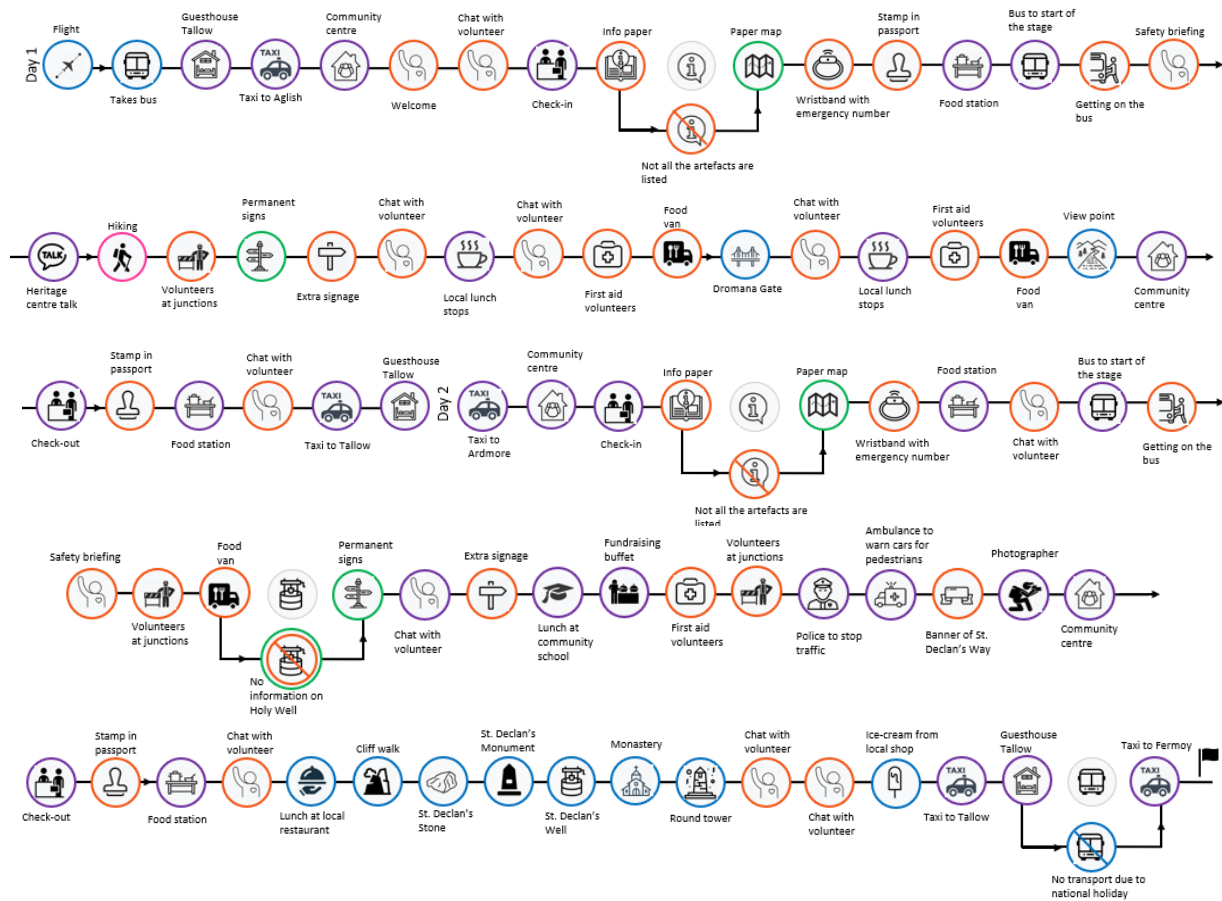


Figure 11: Experience stage actual tourist journey 2

4.2.3. Post-experience stage

The post-experience stage for both tourist journeys was entirely the same. The tourist showed the same behaviour regarding mouth-to-mouth advertising, social media behaviour, and responding to email requests. Additionally, KMDA created five brand-owned touchpoints, including emails asking participants to share their photos made and fill out a survey about their experience. Furthermore, the photos made during the event and the photos sent in by participants are posted on Facebook to stimulate snowball advertising. In this experience, missing touchpoints were related to the lack of social media presence on Instagram and Twitter, gap between receiving and reading the follow-up emails, and missing out on online reviews. Only in the last tourist journey, one extra touchpoint was added as KMDA sought personal contact with the researcher.

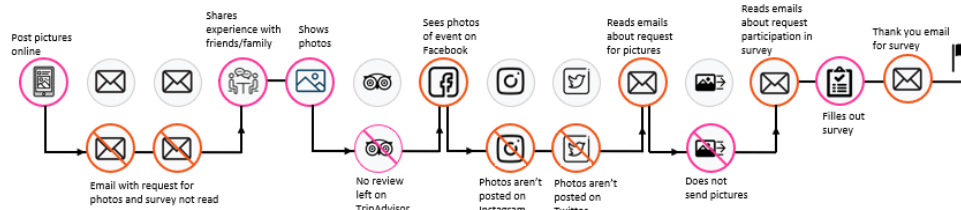


Figure 12: Post-experience stage actual tourist journey

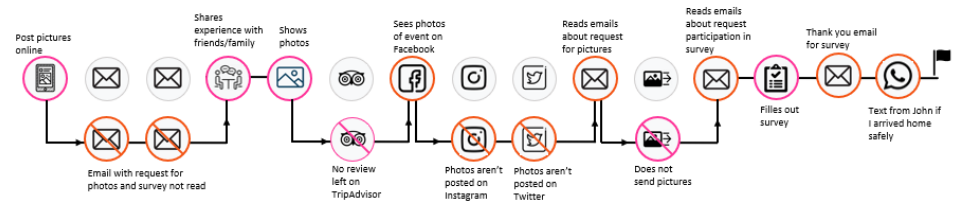


Figure 12: Post-experience stage actual tourist journey

4.3 Gaps in tourist experience

This chapter provides an answer to both sub-questions three and four; 'To what extent do the planned and actual tourist experiences correspond?' and 'Which missing touchpoints should be included in the tourist journey?'. The answers to these questions are based upon the planned and actual tourist journeys described in sections 4.1 and 4.2 and additional information retrieved from the interviews.

It was found that the actual tourist journeys were longer than the planned tourist journey. This is in contradiction with literature, as normally not all planned touchpoints are experienced (Halvorsrud, Kvale, & Følstad, 2016). The reason why the actual journey in this research is longer than the planned is related to the voluntary nature of the organisations. Everybody is responsible for their own individual tasks. The management of the organisations does have an idea of what everybody is doing, but nobody knows the in-depth details of the tasks performed by the other members. Additionally, many of the touchpoints are created by personal contact between volunteers from KMDA, the Steering Committee, and local community groups and the hikers participating in the walking event, making it difficult to map out every single touchpoint that occurs throughout the experience.

“...We are the touch points... We are the stone that's thrown into the pond. And we create this ripple effect. We have no idea who is going to say what to somebody at some stage that will influence them to come to the area, do a walk or maybe even relocate here... We create a ripple of which we will never be able to quantify the effect.” ~ Frank, member of Knockmealdown Active.

4.3.1 Pre-experience

In the pre-experience stage, a disconnection was identified as the struggle the researcher had to get to the area and find accommodation. The lack of available accommodation and transportation along the route was found to be a huge turnback. Moreover, the researcher did not find any information regarding the check-in location of the event, which made it difficult to book accommodation and arrange transportation. The Steering Committee likewise identified that while an attempt is made to obtain transportation and accommodation partners, the area is still very inaccessible.

“... In terms of the gaps, it is the accommodation in rural areas, and it is transport. Because the transport... is going from Tallow to Dungarvan... So, it's going West to East or East to West, and the track is going North to South. So, the challenge really is that we extend this functionality between these two countries and that we get these busses to interlinking. And develop a strategy on that front.” – Niamh, member of the Steering Committee

The difficulty in finding accommodation partners could be because the population of the villages along the St. Declan's Way are not aware of the route's existence.

"If you would walked into Aglish today and asked someone where the St. Declan's Way is, 80% couldn't tell you." – John, IT consultant for Knockmealdown Active and the Steering Committee

Additionally, contradicting information regarding the length of stage 3 was found. This, in combination with the notification from KMDA that a certain level of fitness was required for this route, made the researcher unsure whether she would be able to finish this stage. Moreover, it was found that the researcher did use TripAdvisor to see others' experiences, while this was not considered by both organisations. Lastly, it was recognised that the St. Declan's Way had a very active Facebook account and occasionally posted something on their feed throughout the pre-experience stage, but all these posts were missing on the other social media channels. This resulted in a gap in the information provision as the researcher mainly uses Instagram. This lack of social media presence was also noticed by the IT consultant of both organisations.

"These events started from March 16th, so a lot of the participants booked in January. So, ... from January to March, they didn't really see anything from us, apart from the fact that we would put a few posts on Facebook just to let them know that we're still alive or whatever." – John, IT consultant for Knockmealdown Active and the Steering Committee

4.3.2 Experience

In the experience stage, not a lot of dissimilarities were found. Although the actual tourist experience went more in depth on the encountered touchpoints related to the check-in, such as the received maps, passport, and wristband with emergency number, where this was not mentioned by the members. Building on this, at stage 3 different colours of wristbands were handed out, which created confusion at the bus arrangements as everybody was looking for the bus assigned to their colour wristband. In the actual journey more focus was laid on touchpoints belonging to partners and external owners, including the conversation with the writer at Mount Melleray, the heritage talk in Lismore, and the Cliffwalk in Ardmore. A gap in information on cultural sights was identified. Throughout the walk, the researcher gazed upon a lot of cultural heritage, but most of them did not have an interpretive panel or other form

of information available. Adding to that, the interpretive panels that were placed by the Steering Committee were missed in the actual experience. KMDA tried to breach this gap by handing out walking notes prior to departure, including information on the event but also on the surroundings the stage that day went through. These notes provided information on the most important assets. However, many were missing. The lack of information at cultural elements was also identified by KMDA:

“There is no information. So, with Knockmealdown Active, what we're hoping to do is to use modern technology, and to have QR codes. Because I think nowadays, signs become redundant very quickly. And they're open to damage and deterioration from the weather. And the information might change slightly. So that at least with a QR code that relates that brings you back to a site or a noticeboard or a history, some people want a lot of history.” – Frank, member of Knockmealdown Active

Therewithal, the Steering Committee established that there are a couple of sites that still need to be included in the St. Declan's Way.

“But we know that we have at least three or four sites that we need to develop further, those sites need to have a conservation survey first. They obviously need the agreement of the landowner for the survey to take place. And then there needs to be some funding source to clean them up. To set up the access... Set the fencing or some small bridge to go over stream or some steps or whatever... A small project could be €30,000/€40,000 or €50,000 and a big project could easily be a €100,000 euros depending on all that needs to be fixed.” – Niamh, member of the Steering Committee

4.3.3 Post-experience

In the post-experience stage, divergence was found between the actual journey and the planned journey. In the actual tourist journey, emphasis was laid on tourist owned touchpoints such as sharing the experience with friends and relatives, posting pictures on social media channels, and showing pictures to others. These touchpoints were not considered by the organisations. Moreover, the researcher again identified that photos of the event were only posed on Facebook, whereas there was no activity on the other channels. In contrast, the post-experience of the planned journey included touchpoints such as press releases and blogposts. The researcher did not identify these touchpoints.

Another gap retrieved from the interviews was related to the tourists who decide to walk the St. Declan's Way individually. It was identified that the online marketing of the trail was mainly based around the time of the event. From the moment the events are over, not a lot has been posted until the start of the upcoming annual event. There is not a lot of information published that is specific to people walking the trail themselves.

"I just kind of hibernate as soon as the five stages are over. And there won't be more than that for a while. Until we're doing something again. Whereas it probably should be, you know, a couple of times a month, you put up something that's relevant to people who are doing the route, under their own steam"– John, IT consultant for Knockmealdown Active and the Steering Committee

Overall, it was recognised that KMDA and the Steering Committee are aware of many of the gaps identified in the actual tourist journey, and they are aware of other gaps related to the tourist experience of individuals walking the St. Declan's Way outside of the organised event. However, overcoming these gaps without the availability of state funding is a nearly impossible task.

"We have we have the ideas, but we're nearly at the top, absolutely, of what volunteerism can do" – Frank, member of Knockmealdown Active

5. Discussion

This chapter will go in-depth on the methods included in this research by evaluating their applicability and usability in the broader context of this research and how these methods are of real-world significance.

From the literature, it was established that most tourist experience studies focus on the atomistic nature of a tourist journey, in which the tourist experience is created by one single firm or organisation (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). In alignment with Page and Connell (2014), the data in this research indicated that the tourist journey of the St. Declan's Way has a holistic nature as the touchpoints encountered are provided by different organisations, local community groups, accommodation and transportation partners, and external actors. Even though barely any researchers approached the tourist experience from a holistic point of view (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Page & Connell, 2014), it was assumed that tourist journey mapping would still be a suitable framework to identify the relationship between a tourist and the organisations involved in the St. Declan's Way. However, an important component that was not previously established from internet research was identified, which made the mapping process of the planned tourist journey more difficult. This component was the voluntary nature of all organisations involved. While the planned journey map provided a clear overview of the main interactions between the tourist and the organisations, it did not include all the touchpoints involved in the tourist experience. The management of the organisation did have an idea of the overall interactions that occurred, but nobody knew the in-depth details of all the encounters performed. This creates a new dimension to the gap in literature because there is also no research conducted on the holistic nature of tourist journeys established by voluntary organisations.

Moreover, the ServQual method was included in this research to measure whether the event along St. Declan's Way met the tourist expectations and if a level of satisfaction was reached (Parasuraman, Zeithalm, & Berry, 1994). As in this research, the researcher serves as the tourist this framework was also implemented to achieve credible results as the interpretations of the services provided are influenced by the tourist's own subjective and intrinsic cognition (Hay, 2016; Veal, 2011). The inclusion of this framework helped the researcher systematically evaluate if her expectations were met and if a level of satisfaction was reached. Throughout the data collection, it was identified that the ServQual method vaguely described the variables belonging to the five components, making it very unclear which aspects belonged to which variable. Moreover, the framework did not take the three stages of the tourist journey into account (Parasuraman, Zeithalm, & Berry, 1994). As a result, it was unclear to what stage each

variable referred to. Throughout the primary data collection, the ServQual method was adjusted on the spot. The framework's generalisability, and the need for specification to industry was also noted by Kowalska and Ostrega (2020). The updated framework comprises of a pre-experience, an experience, and a post-experience stage. Per stage, the original 5 components and 22 variables are listed. Notwithstanding, the variables were specified using the touchpoint elements identified by Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) listed in appendix 5.5. The updated framework can be found in appendices 5.3.1 and 5.3.2.

Lastly, this research included an experience diary in which the researcher documented every single touchpoint encountered during the tourist journeys. This was a self-initiated method, in which the researcher recorded the date of the touchpoint, an extensive description of the touchpoint, the actor(s) involved, the owner of the touchpoint, the emotions felt, and whether it was a peak or valley in the tourist journey. Although not all the aspects monitored were included in the analysis and visualisation of the actual tourist journey, the data is of value since it could be used to visualise the emotional journey of a tourist and how this influences whether a touchpoint is experienced as a peak or valley. Building on this, not all the touchpoints described in the experience diary are included in the tourist journey. This was because the researcher also described things such as the delay of the aeroplane in the Netherlands. While these touchpoints did influence the overall experience of the trip, they were not at all related to the event planned along the St. Declan's Way. Since this research specifically focuses on the St. Declan's Way, it was chosen to exclude these touchpoints from the report.

Due to the lack of a customer-centric approach in the augmentation of walking tourism, as well as the fact that no research on tourist journey maps along pilgrimage trails has been conducted (Norton & Pine, 2013; McColl-Kennedy, et al., 2015). This data contributes to a clearer understanding of the series of encounters that occur between a tourist and the organization(s) involved in pilgrimage trails. This understanding can function as a knowledge baseline and can be further developed, adjusted, expanded, and implemented at other pilgrimages or hiking trails across the globe. However, when using this research as a baseline, it is important to acknowledge the voluntary structure of the organisations involved in the St. Declan's Way. The way in which this structure interacts is very place specific as numerous external elements, including location, length of residence, cultural background, etc., could potentially influence the way in which a voluntary organisation interacts.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This research aimed to identify how the tourist journey from an experiential perspective can contribute to the improvement of the planned tourist experience along the St. Declan's Way, Ireland. To accomplish this, this research was written from an experiential approach in which the researcher fully participated in the walking events of stages 3, 4, and 5 of the St. Declan's Way. Two types of methods were applied to answer the research question. First, participant observation was used in which the researcher described and analysed her personal experience along the trail. Additionally, 3 expert interviews were held with actors involved in KMDA and/or the Steering Committee to map the planned experience. To determine the correspondence between the planned and actual tourist experience, the actual tourist journey was compared to the planned tourist journey. This led to various missing touchpoints.

From the tourist perspective, the following touchpoints were missing: 1) a phone number on the website of the St. Declan's Way, 2) information on the check-in location of the event, 3) availability of transportation and accommodation in the area, 4) online presence on social media platforms other than Facebook, 5) information on cultural and historic artefacts found along the trail, and 6) confusion about the bus division to the start of the 3rd stage. From the interviews, it was found that KMDA and the Steering Committee are aware of most of the gaps identified during the actual tourist experience. Additionally, they identified that 1) there is a lack of awareness about the St. Declan's Way amongst residents of the villages close to the trail and 2) the PR consultant stated that there has not been a lot done to attract tourists who would like to walk the St. Declan's Way individually. However, overcoming these gaps without funding is nearly impossible. As Frank, a member of KMDA, stated, "*We have the ideas, but we're nearly at the top, absolutely, of what volunteerism can do.*"

To answer the research question, '*How can the tourist journey from an experiential approach, contribute to the improvement of the planned tourist experience along the St. Declan's Way, Ireland?*'. The following budget-efficient recommendations are established for KMDA and the Steering Committee:

- On the Monday before the event takes place, information emails are sent to all participants. These information emails include, amongst other things, the check-in location of the event. Receiving this information five days before the event is well in time for participants who live in the area. Although, for foreigners or for hikers from the more northern counties of Ireland, this poses a difficulty as the check-in location is needed to arrange accommodation. To overcome this gap, it is recommended to

list the check-in location of each stage in the booking process of the tickets needed for the walking event. By doing this, tourists have more time to arrange their accommodation and transportation in this rural area.

- To increase activity on Instagram, it is recommended to connect the Facebook page of St. Declan's Way to the St. Declan's Way Instagram account. By doing this, every post that is posed on Facebook can be automatically posed on Instagram with just one bottom click.
- During the 3rd stage of the St. Declan's Way, confusion arose in relation to the bus division to the start of the stage. At the registry counters, different coloured wristbands were provided. Many hikers thought that the colour of the wristband was related to the bus division. This resulted in a chaotic situation in which everybody was searching for their bus, while there was no allocated bus division. To prevent this from happening in the future, it is recommended to use only one colour wristband.
- From the interviews, it was established that the volunteers have a lot of knowledge about the St. Declan's Way and the region, but they do not have a portal via which they can transfer this knowledge to tourists. To overcome the lack of information provided on the cultural and historic artefacts found along the route, it is recommended to create a blog post for each artefact found and link this to the website. These blogposts can be volunteer-run. Each artefact should have its own blog post with a clear headline. Not only will this provide extra information to the tourists involved in the event, but it will also provide extra information to the hikers who chose to walk the trail individually. Moreover, these blogposts will also generate more traffic to the website because the website will pop-up every time a person googles one of the subjects of the blogpost. This, in turn, raises awareness of the St. Declan's Way.
- To increase the availability of accommodation in the region, it might be worthwhile to establish farm camping or at least local partnerships with farmers who allow hikers to camp at their property for one or two nights in exchange for a small fee.
- However, to achieve this, awareness amongst residents about the St. Declan's Way should be increased. On top of involving local community groups, the following options could be explored: having information stands at local fairs, guest lectures at primary or secondary schools, and advertisements on announcement boards in supermarkets or flyers at local stores (especially the ones that sell outdoor gear).

Additionally, the following recommendations for improvement of current work and future research are created:

- Due to the timeframe of this research, only the walking events along the last three stages of the St. Declan's Way were researched. These stages are in a rural area, and as a result, the main challenges experienced were transportation and accommodation issues. Stages 1 and 2 are located near large towns where the infrastructure and accommodation are built to facilitate tourists. It is therefore expected that different gaps in the tourist experience will be present in this area. It is therefore recommended to redo this research and include all five stages of the St. Declan's Way.
- Additionally, the second actual tourist journey was heavily influenced by the personal contact between the researcher and members of KMDA and the Steering Committee, as email contact was established to recruit informants for the interviews. To overcome that the data is influenced by such interactions, it is recommended to reassess the entire St. Declan's Way over a longer period. This will enable the researcher to first gather the data on the actual tourist journey as a full participant before revealing their identity to recruit informants. This would increase the validity of the results as the researcher would experience the walking events just like every other tourist.
- On a different note, it was established that KMDA and the Steering Committee had trouble quantifying the economic impact generated by the St. Declan's Way. It is therefore recommended that additional research be conducted to create an Economic Impact Assessment (EIA) on this region to identify the benefits on local employment and income, which could potentially assist the Steering Committee in obtaining state funding.
- Moreover, the findings showed that it is difficult to map the planned tourist experience because of the voluntary, holistic nature of the organisations involved in the St. Declan's Way. The difference between voluntary and involuntary organisations regarding tourist journey mapping has not yet been approached in research, nor is the tourist experience mapped from the holistic nature of volunteerism. This could potentially be an interesting topic for research.
- Lastly, the St. Declan's Way is a successful bottom-up tourism initiative that is completely supported by local voluntary groups, residents, and regional partners. With the current trend of SMART hospitality and the inclusion of the local community in sustainable tourism development, the St. Declan's Way could be used as a case study on how to successfully set up a community-led tourism initiative.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 5.1: Interview guide

Topic	Concepts from literature	Question	Probes
Opening questions		<p>How are you doing today?</p> <p>Did you read the consent form?</p> <p>Can I record this interview?</p> <p>Would you like to discuss anything before we start?</p>	<p>Are there unclarities regarding the consent form?</p>
Involvement in KMDA /Steering Committee		<p>Could you introduce yourself?</p> <p>What is your occupation?</p> <p>In which year did you join the KMDA Steering Committee?</p>	<p>What is your role within KMDA /Steering Committee?</p> <p>What is your role in the St. Declan's Way?</p>
Terminology		<p>Before diving into the questions relating to the tourist journey and the touchpoints Could you describe your definition of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Tourist journey 2) Touchpoints <p>In this research focus is laid upon the 3 stages of the tourist journey. The pre-experience stage entails all touchpoints a tourist encounters before their trip to the St. Declan's Way occurs. The experience stage reaches from the moment the tourist travels to the St. Declan's way till the moment the tourist returns home/travels to another destination. Lastly, the post-experience stage comprises of all touchpoints a tourist experiences after they returned home/the experience ended.</p>	

Experience of the St. Declan's Way		How is the St. Declan's Way marketed to tourists?	What message does KMDA /Steering Committee want to bring across? How would you describe the St. Declan's Way to tourists?
Pre-experience state (Dhebar, 2013; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rosenbaum, Otalora, & Ramirez, 2016; Voorhees, et al., 2017)	Touchpoint owners (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand-owned • Partner-owned • Customer-owned • External/independent actor 	To deliver this experience, which touchpoints does KMDA /Steering Committee provide in the pre-experience stage of the tourist journey?	
Experience stage (Dhebar, 2013; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rosenbaum, Otalora, & Ramirez, 2016; Voorhees, et al., 2017)	5A's of resources that should be present at a destination (Reitsamer, Brunner-Sperdin, & Stockburger-Sauer, 2016; Forlani, Ferrucci, & Picciotti, 2021). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attractions • Accessibility • Accommodation • Amenities • Activities 	Which touchpoints does KMDA Steering Committee provide during the experience stage of the tourist journey?	
Post-experience stage (Dhebar, 2013; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rosenbaum, Otalora, & Ramirez, 2016; Voorhees, et al., 2017)	Touchpoint categories (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atmospheric • Technological • Communicative • Process • Service provider-tourist interactions • Tourist-tourist interaction • Product-interaction 	Which touchpoints does KMDA Steering Committee provide during the post-experience stage of the tourist journey?	
Missing touchpoints	Touchpoint owners (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand-owned • Partner-owned • Customer-owned 	Which touchpoints are missing in the St. Declan's Way? Which existing touchpoints are in need of adjustment or removal?	How could those touchpoints be incorporated? Why? In what way?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External/independent actor <p>5A's of resources that should be present at a destination (Reitsamer, Brunner-Sperdin, & Stockburger-Sauer, 2016; Forlani, Ferrucci, & Picciotti, 2021).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attractions • Accessibility • Accommodation • Amenities • Activities <p>Touchpoint categories (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atmospheric • Technological • Communicative • Process • Service provider-tourist interactions • Tourist-tourist interaction <p>Product-interaction</p>		
Closing questions		<p>Would you like to discuss anything else?</p> <p>Would you like to receive a copy of the interview transcript or the research report itself?</p> <p>Would you mind if this report is to be published?</p>	Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 5.2: Experience Diary

5.2.1 Positionality of the researcher

When I was 17, I lived for a year in Ireland as an exchange student. I lived in Monaghan, a County bordering with Northern Ireland. I lived with an Irish family and went to a public secondary school, joined foróige and was a member of the school basketball team. This year made me fall in love with the country, the culture and especially the people. The Irish curious, always in for a chat, and very helpful. I return to Ireland on a frequent basis to visit my host family or to have a break from school in the Netherlands. I am planning on continuing my studies Trinity College with the MSc Smart and Sustainable Cities next year. Although I have never been in the area in which the St. Declan's Way is located, it is more than safe to say that my year in Ireland influences the way in which I approach, expect, perceive, and probably experience the trail.

Moreover, I am a female master student in my mid-twenties of a Dutch origin. I travelled all the way to Ireland to walk a pilgrimage trail in the countryside. My identity might be opposing to that of the informants I will interview. Members of the KMDA /Steering Committee are local stakeholders, they are probably of a different age and have a different national, educational, and cultural background.

During the conduction of the interviews, I noticed that my positionality, approach, and attitude differed between the three different informants that I interviewed. On Friday the 29th of April, I conducted an interview with Niamh, who is on the Steering Committee of the St. Declan's Way. Before the interview, I had sent an information letter and consent form to all the informants to ensure that they had enough time to consider their participation in this research. Niamh additionally requested upon receiving my interview guide and an executive summary of my dissertation. Her position in the Steering Committee, in combination with all the extra information that she requested, made me a bit nervous, as it gave me the feeling that I was not as prepared as I thought to be and that I might have misunderstood their organization. During the interview, I therefore focused a lot on the organizational structure of the committees involved. I was also a bit more nervous for this interview than I was for the others. Luckily, the nerves faded once I met Niamh.

On Monday evening, May the 2nd, I had an interview with both Frank and John, as a combination interview took place. I was not nervous at all. I met both man during the 4th and 5th stage of the St. Declan's Way. The atmosphere was relaxed and easy-going. It felt more like a chat with friends in the pub than an interview. In this interview I mainly focussed on John, as I would also have a second interview with Frank as he would drive me back to Cork.

The next day, on May 3rd, I again had an interview with Frank as he offered to drive me to Cork. This interview took place in his car, establishing a very informal setting. Since Frank is a geographer, I asked a couple of additional questions regarding toponyms, local heritage, cultural and natural land layering, and heritage in this interview. Moreover, I used more field related terms than during the other interviews where I tried to keep the language as clear and simple as possible.

During the analysis of the data, especially during the creation of the actual tourist journey, I had to use my experience diary and the ServQual method a lot. I found it sometimes a bit difficult to not forget about the aspects I disliked about the event and the trail itself. I, but also people in general, tend to forget the inconvenience encountered when the overall experience is perceived as very successful. My experience journey and the ServQual analysis gave me the insights and details of the touchpoints I disliked and ensured that I did not forget about the nerves, worries, stress, and panic I had felt during my search for accommodation and transportation.

5.2.2 Experience diary stage 3

Meaning of the emoticons



Exceeding all expectations; being super content with the service encounter;



Service encounter is better than expected



The service encounter is sufficient; It is not bad, but also not good; neutrality



The service encounter is worse than expected; small gap in tourist journey




Huge gap in tourist journey; gap could lead to missed 'sales'

Background research on the St. Declan's Way


Date	28 th of February
Description of touchpoint	Before the module started, I was thinking of writing my dissertation on Santiago de Compostela. After doing some research I found that this topic has been widely researched. Still interested in pilgrimage routes, I started to look for other routes in Europe. With my love for Ireland, I rapidly stumbled upon the St. Declan's Way in Ireland. To research if this pilgrimage route is suitable for my dissertation, I searched the website. I found that the website is a rather simple WordPress website. Which is not a bad thing. The website contained enough information for hikers who are interested in walking the St. Declan's Way. However, if you want to know more than the basic information the website would not have been sufficient. Moreover, I found it a bit weird that there was no phone number on which you could contact the organisation behind the St. Declan's Way. This made me doubt the legitimacy of the website. Social media channels and an email address were provided.
Actor involved	Website of St. Declan's Way
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand-owned (Steering Committee)
Emotions felt	Exciting, curious, doubt about legitimacy
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Looking for social media channels

Date	28 th of February, 2022
Description of touchpoint	To obtain more information on the St. Declan's Way I had a look at all the social media channels present. I found that the St. Declan's Way has a Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter account. Facebook is by far their most predominant means of communication. There are not a lot of post, but there is at

<p>Actor involved</p> <p>Owner of the touchpoint</p> <p>Emotions felt</p>	<p>least an update occasionally on activities related to the St. Declan's Way. This is not the case on Instagram and Twitter.</p> <p>Both Steering Committee as KMDA</p> <p>Brand owned</p> <p>I found it really nice that they do have numerous social media channels. Tough, I would have liked to see more presence and information.</p>
<p>Peak or valley in customer journey?</p>	<p></p>

Missing information on location of the check-in

<p>Date</p> <p>Description of touchpoint</p>	<p>29th of February, 2022</p> <p>After doing the background research I decided that this event/walking route would be really suitable for my thesis. I therefore decided to travel to Ireland to walk the 3rd, 4th, and 5th stage of the St. Declan's Way. However, as this is an organised walking event, each day before hiking all hikers have to gather at a location. There is no information available on social media or the website where each stage start. For example, I will first walk from Goatenbridge to Lismore but I do not know if the meeting point is in Goatenbridge or in Lismore or somewhere else. This makes it really difficult for me to book accommodation and sort out my transportation to the stage.</p>
<p>Actor involved</p> <p>Owner of the touchpoint</p> <p>Emotions felt</p>	<p>KMDA</p> <p>Brand-owned</p> <p>If it were not for the reason that I decided to do the St. Declan's Way for my dissertation I would have probably chosen to go and walk a different route. I never hiked before and the insecurity of not knowing where to go or where to stay would normally have led to the end of my customer journey. I feel stressed about not getting there and spending a lot of money on taxi's because I booked an accommodation on a very inconvenient location.</p>
<p>Peak or valley in customer journey?</p>	<p></p>

Finding a positive review on trip advisor

<p>Date</p> <p>Description of touchpoint</p>	<p>2nd of March, 2022</p> <p>I was scrolling through internet sites to find information for my thesis when I found a positive review about the St. Declan's Way on Tripadvisor. This man had also participated in one of the walking events of KMDA. His review was positive and showed a lot of enthusiasm</p>
<p>Actor involved</p> <p>Owner of the touchpoint</p>	<p>Tripadvisor</p> <p>Independent/external actor</p>

Emotions felt Good feeling about the trip, if he can make it to these inaccessible locations I will manage too, raising excitement
Peak or valley in customer journey? 😊


Booking the first flight tickets

Date 4th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint To get to the St. Declan's Way I need plane tickets from Amsterdam to Cork. I therefore consulted the website of Aer Lingues, as Ryanair does not fly on Cork. I booked my tickets, but they turned out to be more expensive than anticipated. Normally, flights between Amsterdam and Dublin are about €30 euros and this single flight costs €250,-. Which kind of set me off, especially as I need to buy a second ticket as well. I even considered not going, or only go there one time as a result of the expense.
Actor involved The website of Aer Lingus
Owner of the touchpoint External/independent actor
Emotions felt My excitement degraded a bit
Peak or valley in customer journey? 😞


Booking ticket walking event of Knockmealdown stage 3

Date 4th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint To participate in the walking event organised by KMDA, a ticket needs to be bought. The website provides a very clear description of all the attributes one needs to participate in the walking event as well as what the requirements are. To acquire a ticket, one should not only fill out their personal details but also list allergies and any health conditions the organization should be aware of. Moreover, the page states that each participant must sign him or herself up at the start and sing out at the finish. This will help prevent people from disappearing.
Actor involved KMDA
Owner of the touchpoint Brand-owned touchpoint
Emotions felt Excitement, being well taken care of, feeling that I can do this, feeling of looking forward to the trip
Peak or valley in customer journey? 😊

Booking confirmation walking event stage 3

Date	4 th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint	After I booked the ticket for the walking event from Goatenbridge to Lismore I received an email from KMDA that informed me that my order has been received and that I will be send a follow up email a week before the event takes place. This email will contain further information about the walking trip. I was not expecting such an email.
Actor involved	KMDA
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand-owned touchpoint
Emotions felt	Surprise, looking forward, excitement
Peak or valley in customer journey?	


Start looking for accommodation in Goatenbridge

Date	4 th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint	The third stage goes from Goatenbridge to Lismore. I am expecting that the walking event will therefore also start in Goatenbridge. I decided to look for accommodation in Goatenbridge. I first consulted the website of the St. Declan's Way, and I found a recommended homestay. However, this homestay did not have a website, so it was impossible for me to find out if the homestay was in town or a bit outside of town. I therefore decided to first have a look at the availability of public transportation.
Actor involved	St. Declan's Way website (Steering Committee and KMDA) and the homestay provider (partner
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand-owned actors and partner-owned actors
Emotions felt	Clueless, stressful, wondering why I decided to do this research in the first place
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Researching how to come get to Goatenbridge

Date	4 th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint	The third stage of the St. Declan's Way starts in Goatenbridge, a one street village about 85 km from Cork. To get there I firstly decided to rent a car, however, as I am not 30, I have to pay an extra insurance due to which the cost went sky high. I thereupon decided to travel to Goathenbridge by public transportation. This turned out to be a hell of journey. It will take about 3,5 hours and the closest I will get is 30km away from Goatenbrigde in Lismore. I have no clue how to reach Goatenbridge, I probably have to take the taxi or something like that.
Actor involved	Public transportation and local taxi services
Owner of the touchpoint	Independent/external actors and partner-owned actors

Emotions felt Definitely have the feeling that this trip is not going to end well. I would not have gone here if I did not do my research for it.

Peak or valley in customer journey? 


Booking accommodation Lismore

Date 4th of March 2022
Description of touchpoint I decided to book accommodation in Lismore, the town which is most closely located to Goatenbridge and at the same time is the village in which the 3rd stage of the St. Declan's Way ends. I first looked at Booking.com to find maybe a hotel or small apartment but there was no accommodation offered on Booking.com. I had better luck on Airbnb where a woman named Tanya rented out a room in her house. Her house was located in the town centre and was priced for a decent amount. I therefore decided to book my accommodation there.

Actor involved Booking.com/ Airbnb and local homestay

Owner of the touchpoint External actors

Emotions felt Happiness, relief, excitement

Peak or valley in customer journey? 


How to get to Lismore

Date 4th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint As I booked my accommodation in Lismore, I wanted to find out which route I could take to this village. I used Google maps to find the busses and the schedules. There are two ways to reach Lismore from Cork. I could either go via Fermoy or via Dungarvan to Lismore. Both routes had very inconvenient time schedules. The route via Fermoy took about 4 hours and only drives two hours a day. The bus via Dungarvan drives also for 2 times a day but the duration is a bit over 3 hours. Both busses departed once in the morning and ones in the early afternoon (around 12/1). As I would arrive at Cork Airport at 10:15 I will not manage to get on the first bus of that day. I really hope that I will manage to get on the 2nd bus because otherwise I travel to Ireland for nothing as I would not make it in time to start the walking event.


Actor involved Google maps, Buseireann, Local Link bus

Owner of the touchpoint External actors


Emotions felt Bit worried about the bus, but confident that I will manage to get the second bus

Peak or valley in customer journey? 

Social media posts

Date	The weeks before the 3 rd stage of the hiking event
Description of touchpoint	In my first phase of researching the St. Declan’s Way I found the social media channels of this route, which I all followed. I noticed that over the past weeks a bit of media presence on Facebook where KMDA /the Steering committee posted some encouragement post with the aim to attract more people to buy a ticket for their event as well as that they published post keeping the hikers involved with the development of the route and the meetings held. However, these posts were only published on Facebook and not on the other social media channels.
Actor involved	KMDA, Steering Committee, Facebook
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand owned and external actor
Emotions felt	Excitement for walking the trip.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Text received from KMDA

Date	11 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	I received a message on Whatsapp of KMDA in which they explained where I could park my car, including an address from which also the shuttle bus to Goatenbridge will depart. Moreover, the text also mentions that the full details of the day can be found in the email they send out to me. This really lifted the weight of not knowing how to get from Lismore to Goatenbridge from my shoulders. My head has been tossing and turning about what to do regarding this accessibility issue. It would have been nice if KMDA mentioned the pickup point now of ticket purchase as accommodation and all that sort of things are depending on it along with that it ensures a more positive tourism experience. Nevertheless, relieved me from some stress
Actor involved	KMDA
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand owned
Emotions felt	Relief, comfort, reduction of stress, sense of calmness and feeling that everything is going to be alright
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Follow up text received from KMDA

Date	13 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	I received another text of KMDA in which they asked if I had successfully received the information. I had not responded to the first text received from them as I thought it was sent with the purpose of providing me with the emergency number as

well as that it functioned as information provision. I had never expected this follow up text and it came therefore as a pleasant surprise. I replied to this message that I am looking forward to the trip and that I have received all the information. Whereafter I again received a text from KMDA, this time signed with a name. I felt so special due to this personal contact. It gave me the impression that KMDA really cares for the tourists and that I as an individual matter.

Actor involved
 Owner of the touchpoint
 Emotions felt
 Peak or valley in customer journey?

KMDA
 Brand-owned
 Appreciated, special, worth it,



Reading the email received from KMDA

Date
 Description of touchpoint


14th of April 2022
 I finally read through the email that I have received on Monday. I did not expect that this email would be so detailed. The email firstly discussed the parking possibilities and the departure point, whereafter focus was laid on the check-in process. The email also touched upon distance and footwear, the route, the weather, maps, and brochures. Where all information was clear, one thing stood out to me, which is the distance of the 3rd stage of the St Declan’s Way. In the email it is stated that the 3rd stage is 24 km but on the website of the St. Declan’s way it states that the route is 30km. This is a rather big difference and it ensured that I remain in a bit of confusion about what to expect. Similarly, is applicable to the high of the Knockmealdown Mountain range. Data on the highest point can be found on google. However, the 3rd stage goes through the bottle neck of the mountain range. It would have been nice to know how high the elevation is there (this is something that is not mentioned anywhere on the internet). Additionally, it is stated on the website and in the information letter that a certain level of fitness is required for this stage. This in combination with the uncertainty about the elevation and distance makes me wonder if I meet the requirements. I am not unhealthy, but I also did not do a lot of sport over the last couple of months. Moreover, I am also not a hiker. I never walked for longer than 12 km nor have I hiked in the mountains.

Actor involved
 Owner of the touchpoint
 Emotions felt
 Peak or valley in customer journey?

KMDA, email service
 Brand-owned, external/independent touchpoint
 Excitement, confusion, uncertainty, relief, and happiness that I now knew what to expect (sort of)



Critical conversation with my mom on feasibility and safety of the trip

Date	21 st of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint	I discussed my struggles regarding transportation to the start of the walking event as well as the lack of accommodation between stage 4 and 5 with my mom and she was rather critical in regard to the feasibility of the trip. She does not like the idea that I will be walking there on my own, climbing a 'mountain' while there is nothing in the close surroundings available. She is anxious that there is no signal and that I get lost or hurt. I could not take away her worries as I also have no idea in what kind of situation, I am going to through myself and deep down I slightly worry about the same things.
Actor involved	Mom
Owner of the touchpoint	Tourist-owned touchpoint
Emotions felt	Confusion, feeling that I should call the trip off, the need to find a new thesis topic, anxiety that something will go wrong during the trip.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Morning discussion with mom before departure

Date	15 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	Today was the day of my departure to Ireland and I must admit, I was so nervous. While being to Ireland for so many times I was so stressed about the journey from Cork airport to Lismore. What if I missed the bus due to a delay with the airplane? What if google maps did not provide the right timetable. Maybe the busses would not even drive as it is Eastern. What if the buss is full? Moreover, I was nervous about the hike itself. With the provided information it is difficult to estimate if this hike is going to be a challenge for me. The route is rather long, and I have never done such a long hiking trip and to be honest I have only been on a mountain once in my life. I was worried that the hike would be too challenging for me. These thoughts went over and over in my head with as result that I only slept for 2 hours. My mom always notices when I am worried about things, so she came in my room, and we drank a cup of tea and discussed the trip. We went over all the buss times, the possible routes I could take as well as possible alternatives. This comforted me a bit. Nevertheless, I remained stressed until I got into the second bus.
Actor involved	My mom
Owner of the touchpoint	Independent/ external touchpoint
Emotions felt	Anxious, worried, stressed,

Peak or valley in customer journey?



My expectations before departure

From the moment I decided to participate in the St. Declan’s Way and write my thesis about this pilgrimage route, I have been conflicted about the success and feasibility of this idea. On one hand I am very excited to travel to Ireland, overcome my worries and anxiety regarding the transportation and finally participate in a pilgrimage route. I expect that it will be class. The people are always so nice, welcoming, and helpful in Ireland. I am sure that when things do not turn out as they should, there will always be people who are willing to help me.

I was overly surprised by the amount of information provided from KMDA. They really try to make me as prepared as possible for this hike. Especially the personalization of this trip really provided me with the feeling that they are well organized and that I am in good hands with them.

On the other hand, I am really worried about the transportation to the trail as well as the level of experience that is needed for this route. Throughout the last few weeks, I have found and received a lot of contradicting information. The lack of busses makes me wonder if I will ever make it to Lismore and I am a bit anxious that my physical health is not good enough for the hike. I would have preferred that clear information was provided on these aspects.

Looking up the bus from Cork airport to Lismore (again, because if forgot the information)


Date	15 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	See touchpoint description above
Actor involved	Public transportation
Owner of the touchpoint	Independent/external touchpoint
Emotions felt	Nervous, If I would miss the first there was solely one option left to get to Lismore

Peak or valley in customer journey?




Taking the airplane

Date	15 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	My parents took me to the airport this morning since the train between Alkmaar and Amsterdam was out of order as rail constructions took place all through the Easter weekend. Once on the airport it took almost an hour to get through security. It was very busy on the airport. Eventually my flight had a delay of 1hour and 20 minutes as many of the passengers did not make it through security in time, but their bags were already in the plane. This completely stressed me out because the first bus was already gone before I even left

	the airport in the Netherlands. When we finally took off, I had about 3 hours before the last bus from Cork bus station would depart. Eventually, I decided to just give up on worrying and let it happen. It is all part of the tourist journey, even if everything does not work as it should, the tourist journey will be a success.
Actor involved	Flight company Aer Lingus.
Owner of the touchpoint	External/independent touchpoint
Emotions felt	Anxious, worried, stressed
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

The three busses to Lismore


Date	15 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	<p>We landed on Cork Airport 11 'o clock which gave me enough time to get to the bus station in Cork by either bus or train. On the airport I met a 17-year-old French girl who travelled for the first time. She also had to go to the bus station, but she had no clue where to start, so I invited her to come along with me. Together we took the train to Cork bus station. Once I arrived at the bus station in Cork, I found out that there are actually two busses an hour to Dungarvan. A very unexpected surprise that lightened my mood. I took a bus earlier to Dungarvan. This bus ride went past the Southeast coast of Ireland. The views were spectacular, and the weather was so good! Once in Dungarvan I found out at the bus stop, from the time schedule posted there, that the bus to Lismore departs every hour from Monday to Saturday. It amazed me that this information is not provided on the internet which made me realize how well organized the Netherlands is when it comes to public transportation. Anyhow, the bus to Lismore would depart in 50 minutes so I decided to have a stroll through Dungarvan. I went to the harbour and beach for half an hour living my best life before I took the bus to Lismore.</p> <p>Throughout this journey it was super easy to buy tickets. On the airport there was a ticket machine where you could buy your tickets with coins, notes as well as your card. It was also possible to buy a ticket in the bus with both cash and card. The same was the case on Cork bus station. From Dungarvan to Lismore there was no ticket machine present, but the tickets could be bought in the bus. It was also possible to buy the tickets in advance via the internet. However, you should know with which bus company you are travelling, and this information was rather hard to find as these busses were not listed on the internet... Final note dedicated to this, I was surprised by the prices of the tickets. In the end it costs me €10,20 for nearly 4 hours without a student discount.</p>

Actor involved	Public transportation companies; Bus Eireann, Expressway and Local Link Waterford
Owner of the touchpoint	External, independent touchpoints
Emotions felt	Relief, super happy, living my best life, surprised that this information is not provided on the internet
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Cultural sightseeing in Lismore

Date	15 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	<p>After my arrival I decided to already visit the cultural attractions of Lismore that are included in the St. Declan’s Way. This are the Heritage Centre, the St. Carthage’s Roman Catholic Church, St. Carthage’s Cathedral and Lismore Castle. Luckily this did not influence my perception of the St. Declan’s Way as it was not mandatory to visit the cultural aspects. The opportunity was there but you also had the possibility to just continue the walk. Eventually, I was really happy that I already did these attractions the day before because I was rather cold at the end of the St. Declan’s Way. I firstly went to the St. Carthage’s Roman Catholic Church. This church, as many of the churches in Ireland, had a stunning Celtic inspired graveyard. The church itself was open for public. Although, a mass was taking place, so I did not enter the premises. Outside of the church an information sign was to be found. Thereafter, I walked through Lismore to the St. Carthage’s Cathedral. This graveyard was even more beautiful than the other. Here the eerie feeling was combined with the snowdrops glisten through the dew in the afternoon sun. Inside the Cathedral a lot of information was displayed in the history of Cathedral. The layout of the cathedral was rather simple, but the stained glass the altar was beautifully decorated. From the St. Carthage’s Cathedral, it was just a three-minute walk to Lismore Castle. I was only able to glance upon the castle as only the castle gardens are open to public, but sadly the were already closed at that time. The same was the case for the heritage centre (which eventually happens to not be included in the St. Declan’s Way). Along the way I stumbled upon a lot of signposting’s for different walking routes in the area, including the St. Declan’s Way. Al with all, I am pleasantly surprised by the amount of natural and cultural attractions present in Lismore. Especially, considering the town comprises of a bit more inhabitants than 1300.</p>
Actor involved	Lismore Heritage centre
Owner of the touchpoint	External touchpoint
Emotions felt	Excitement, curiosity, satisfaction
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Chat with Peter/ another man about the St. Declan's Way

Date	15 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	I went out to have dinner in a restaurant in Lismore where I had a nice conversation with the waiter. He introduced himself as Peter and he was interested in what I was doing in Lismore. Reading between the lines I understood that it was not that common for foreigners to visit this town. In no time another man also joined the conversation. We discussed my plans to walk the St. Declan's Way. Especially, the man, of who I did not know his name, was very excited about the St. Declan's Way. He himself is a hiker and he really enjoyed walking this route. He also recommended another route, the Coumshingaun Lough walk, which is also located in that area.
Actor involved	Waiter at Foley's at The Mall and tourist at the restaurant
Owner of the touchpoint	Independent/external touchpoint
Emotions felt	This interaction made me feel at ease, more people know the route and participated in it. They had a very good experience which awakened the feeling that I will also have a nice experience.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Chat with the son of my Airbnb hosts

Date	15 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	After dinner I returned to the Airbnb where I would stay the next couple of days. That afternoon I already dropped of my bag at the house. At that time nobody was home and the homeowner, Tanya, left the key under the flowerpot for me. When entering the house, I heard the voices of playing children in the garden. Tanya asked me to join them in the kitchen where I joined her, her husband, eldest son and his wife for a cup of tea. The son of Tanya hikes a lot as well and he always wanted to do the St. Declan's Way. He told stories about the different tourists that stayed over at Tanya's Airbnb to join the walking events of KMDA. The way in which he described their experience was full of joy and excitement. He admitted that he had never walked the St. Declan's Way himself. Whereafter, he asked me if I would be so kind to send him pictures and tell him about my experience so that he could evaluate if he should walk the route as well. He gave me some recommendations for other walking routes in Ireland. He especially enjoyed the 7-peak route in Northern Ireland where you hike 7 mountains in two days.
Actor involved	Son of the Airbnb host
Owner of the touchpoint	Independent/external actor

Emotions felt

This encounter built upon the feeling that was established in the restaurant. It stimulated the feeling that I will be fine and that I will enjoy the experience.

Peak or valley in customer journey?



Saturday the 16th of April 2022: The 3rd stage of the St. Declan's Way: Goatenbridge to Lismore

Today the 3rd stage of the St. Declan's Way took place. The meeting point was at 9:00 at the Bunscoil Bhothar na Naomh in Lismore. It was a 15-minute walk from my Airbnb, and I shortly arrived before 9 o'clock. Outside of the primary school about 10 coaches were lined up and I think that at least 30 volunteers were walking around to guide all the arriving cars to their parking place. I do not know what I expected, but I did not expect so many people participating in this stage of the St. Declan's Way. One of the volunteers came up to me to guide me to the sign-up area. 😊 Before I could get on the bus, I first needed to get registered inside so that KMDA knew who did or who did not show up. Inside of the primary school gym Knockmealdown had set up 3 sign-in stations, based on your surname. Next to those stations the passport station was to be found. At this station one could receive a stamp in their Irish pilgrimage passport. I firstly signed in at the registration station. Here I received a green wristband with an emergency number on it. With this I received a map of the area and an overview of today's route. On this piece of paper, the breaks, distance, and cultural heritage present along the route were described 😊 This piece of paper again listed a different distance of the route (about 22 to 23 km) 😞. Moreover, the information letter did discuss the most prominent cultural assets that we passed during the route, however, not all were included. I did miss information on the tower shaped statue and the well 😞. Thereafter, I went to the passport station where I received my Irish pilgrimage passport plus my first stamp 😊. In the gym toilets as well as a snack station with fruits, energy/oat bars, and water could be found 😊

Once outside again it was time to get on to the buss. Where the registration was planned and organized into detail, getting on the bus was a bit chaotic. There were multiple colors of wristbands present without any further information on why or for what purpose we received those wristbands. As a result, everybody assumed that the wristbands were connected to the busses. Or at least that is what I, and the other people around me, assumed. However, no indication on bus division was present. We therefore went all to the first volunteer we found to ask about this matter. The poor lady standing there was overwhelmed with the amount of people gathered around her 😡. Eventually, I found out that it did not matter onto which bus you got.

The bus ride to Goatenbridge took about 50 minutes and I truly *** my pants. We drove through the Knockmealdown Mountain range, and the mountains were so much higher than I expected them to

be. The coach had a lot of trouble with taking all 33 passengers uphill. The peaks of some of the mountains could not be seen as they disappeared in the clouds. The longer I sat in the bus the more I started to realize that I had to walk this back as well. At this point I really started to doubt if I would make it to the end of the route. Since covid I haven't done as much sports as I used to, and I also did not really try to train for this walk. On top of that, KMDA had informed the participants that a certain level of physical endurance was needed to walk this stage. I know that I am not unhealthy, but I also had no idea what level of physical endurance was needed. So, honestly, I was not prepared at all for the size of these mountains 😞.

Once we arrived at the start of the 3rd stage, we got off the bus and a couple of volunteers guided us in the right directions 😊. There the first cultural attraction was found, the Liam Lynch Memorial. I would have loved to learn more about this tower however no signs or things were available. I went up to the artefact to take a photo of it and there I met Mary. A woman from Cork who invited me to join her on her walk as I was about the same age as her daughter. She took me to the portable toilets, specially placed by the KMDA to provide the hikers with toilet facilities 😊. Here I met Ciara, Siabhon's 28-year-old daughter. The rest of the hike I joined them. They were very kind, and I really had a lot of fun 😊. The signposting of the St. Declan's Way is clear 😊. You could either follow the large brown or green with white fronts boards that literary state St. Declan's Way to Ardmore. These signposts were more rarely distributed. Smaller signing, a white circle with blue arrow that pointed at the direction, were distributed very regularly and were super easy to follow 😊. Moreover, as this was an organized hike, volunteers of KMDA were placed alongside the route to give us words of encouragement, guide us in the right direction, answer questions, and take appropriate measures in case we needed any (medical) assistance 😊. In the information we received beforehand it was stated that the first part through the mountain range was an accompanied route. Some volunteers did walk the route with us, but it was not an accompanied route. We could all just walk at our own pace, and we did not need to stick to a group or anything. I expected a more guided/accompanied route in which we all had to stick to the group we got assigned to 😞.

After a 15-kilometer hike we arrived at the Abbey located on Mount Mellerey where the lunch break was planned. We stopped here for half an hour to get a cup of tea and eat our lunch. The author Connor of the book the 50 best routes in Ireland was also present. He brought 40 copies of his book that one could buy, and he would sign it for you. After my lunch with Siobhon and Ciara, during which I drank my purchased tea 😊, I went over to John to get a book for Frank and Alexandra, my friends who initially introduced me to pilgrimage trails 😊. Connor was accompanied by a man who is named John. I

remembered this name from one of the text's that I have received before my departure to Ireland. I reckoned that he must be a member of the KMDA organization, and I approached him. After a short introduction to my thesis, he was very enthusiastic and proposed to me to help me find respondents. At the end of the conversations, he provided me with his contact details with I could use to get into contact with him 😊. During the event it was not possible to conduct the interviews as all members were busy with ensuring that everything went as smooth as possible. At this moment the author re-joined our conversation and took a couple of pictures of me and John as I was the only foreigner that came all this way to participate.

Before continuing with the St. Declan's Way Siabhon, Ciara and I first went to the Abby to enjoy witness the ancient prayer of the monks that takes place every day at 14.15. We all got blessed and continued our route 😊. Outside of the Abby, Billy, one of the volunteers, took a picture of us three together. He was also so amazed that I came all the way from the Netherlands to walk the St. Declan's Way. So again, I had a minute of fame in which a lot of people took photos of me. We now finally continued our route 😊. From this point onwards, it was 10 km till the end of this stage in Lismore. The route leading there was a lot easier as the elevation was a lot less and the hills weren't as steep as the mountain side 😊

Not even 2km into the route we ran upon a volunteer dressed as an Easter bunny who handed out candy to everyone passing by. The sight of it was so funny as he jumped around through the high grass 😊. From this point here, the route was located at the side of a road where cars could drive the speed of 50km an hour. The members of KMDA stood at both sides of the road to alarm cars for the pedestrians and tell them to slow down 😊. After 1,5 km or so we made a turn and walked further past small country roads. We followed these roads till the entrance of the village of Lismore. The volunteers were not present here. Which was alright as during those 5/6 km only one car passed us, and the cars could not drive quickly due to the unpaved condition of the roads 😊. During this part of the trail a couple joined us. The woman was very nice, and we talked a while about all the hiking trails that I should carry out in Ireland.

Once we arrived in Lismore, I rejoined Siabhon and Ciara and together with them I finished this part of the route. At the sign-out, which was located in the same building as where the sign in took place, the stations on alphabetical order were reduced from 3 to 2, which did not impact my experience as not all the hikers finished the route at the same time 😊. I firstly signed out at station 2 where the lady put a check behind my name. Thereafter I moved to the passport station where I received two extra stamps 😊. Lastly, I went to the snack station where we could get sandwiches, cupcakes, water, tea, and coffee 😊. While drinking my tea, another volunteer of KMDA came up to me to pitch the *cogadh* (war) challenge.

This event takes place in August and if I remember correctly, one will first cycle 15km, then do a 2,5 km run uphill, followed by a 15km kayak route, then again 2km run uphill and lastly a 10 km bike ride of which 5km uphill. The volunteer, a guy somewhere in his late 50s, bragged about participating in it each year and it being a piece of cake. Well to be honest, thinking of doing this challenge is already tiring enough 😊. Before saying goodbye to Ciara and Siabhon we exchanged phone numbers so that we could exchange pictures and stay in contact 😊.

Very pleasant stay at Tanya her Airbnb

Date	15 th till 17 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	I stayed with Tanya for two nights and I really enjoyed it. She was very hospitable, she made me feel welcome without giving me the feeling that I had to hang out with then all the time. Every morning we had breakfast together and had a chat about things going on in the world, family, friends, and school. On the day that I left she even drove me to the bus stop as she did not want that I would walk all the way through the rain.
Actor involved	Home stay
Owner of the touchpoint	External actor
Emotions felt	Happiness, joy, kindness.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	😊

Smooth bus connection to Cork city

Date	17 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	After Tanya dropped me off at the bus station the transfers between the different busses went very smooth. I arrived back at the airport within 3 hours after which I took the plane home.
Actor involved	Local Link, Bus Eireann, Aerlingus
Owner of the touchpoint	External actors
Emotions felt	Relaxation
Peak or valley in customer journey?	😊

Email of St. Declan's Way

Date	Sent on the 16 th of April 2022, read on 19 th of April 2022
Description of touchpoint	I received an email from the St. Declan's Way in which they thanked me for my participation in the walking route. The email is dedicated to stimulating the participants of the event to share their photographs. In the email they do not directly address me, but they wrote the email in 3 rd person. So rather than saying, you might have made wonderful pictures during the event, it is stated people might have taken wonderful

pictures during the event. I find this kindly encouraging without being persuasive. In the email it is stated via which platforms one can forward the pictures (email, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Seeing those social media platforms made me realise that their social media presence is of a bare minimal. I did find their Facebook page, but I was not aware of their Instagram and Twitter account. Additionally, they also describe the hashtags that are linked to the St. Declan's Way. In the second paragraph it is asked to review the event on Trip Advisor. The link to do so is provided in the email. They do however mention that if one did not like the event, they rather receive an email so that they could correct any issues. This is also the part where they introduced the survey that would also be forwarded to the participants of the event. The KMDA team end the email with a direction to their Facebook page to keep informed on information and weather updates.

Actor involved
Owner of the touchpoint
Emotions felt

KMDA
Brand-owned
I wasn't expecting to receive a following up email, so I was rather surprised. I also liked the way in which the email was written. It was stimulating enough without being persuasive.

Peak or valley in customer journey?



Post-experience mail sent by KMDA

Date
Description of touchpoint

Sent on the 16th of April 2022, read on the 19th of April 2022
I received an email from KMDA which included a link to an online survey. The request was very short 'Will you take a moment to complete this survey, it won't take long'. The survey comprised of 15 questions (this is an estimation as I cannot longer open the survey) asking about my experience along the St. Declan's Way, where I am from and how I found the trail.

Actor involved
Owner of the touchpoint
Emotions felt
Peak or valley in customer journey?

KMDA and SurveySparrow
Brand owned touchpoint
Happy that I could help KMDA out by use of this survey



Email to say thank you

Date
Description of touchpoint
Actor involved
Owner of the touchpoint
Emotions felt
Peak or valley in customer journey?

19th of April, 2022
After I filled out the survey, I received a thankyou letter.
KMDA and SurveySparrow
Brand owned touchpoints
I liked that KMDA sent a thank you email



5.2.3 Influence tourist journey of stage 3 on stage 4 and 5

As a result of my first tourist journey, I was not at all nervous about whether I would make it to the village by use of public transportation. The last time I experienced that it is a lot easier to travel by public transportation as the time schedule is a lot more extensive than mentioned on the internet. Even though, I am not travelling to Lismore this time but to Tallow, for which I need to take a different route, I expect that travelling to this village is not a problem at all. Google identified that this village is reachable by bus so I foresee that I will get there without any difficulty. On the other hand, travelling from Tallow to the start point of stage four and five of the St. Declan's Way is impossible to reach by public transportations as facilities as accommodation and public transportation are not available. Consequentially I chose to stay in Tallow as both starting points of the stages are easily reachable by use of taxi services and in the meanwhile are as cost efficient as possible.

Additionally, after the first tourist journey I had some email correspondence with three members of KMDA and the St. Declan's steering committee. This email contact was mainly related to setting up interviews for my dissertation. Having said that, the accommodation that I have booked for my trip is in alignment to the informant's interview location preference. If I would have organized the trip myself, I would have stayed in Youghal, one of the larger coastal villages close to both stages. On top of that, one of the members of the organization brought me into contact with the local taxi driver who offered to drive me up and down every day for a student fare. This allowed me to organize my entire trip before my departure.


Regarding my preparation before the trip, not a lot has changed when compared to the first journey. I was very well prepared, I brought enough clothing that could be layered on top of each other, I had a small first aid kit, extra shoelaces, tissues, printed consent forms. As I already did the first stage, I knew that I would receive a very detailed information letter about both stages in advance, as well as a text with the start location. Furthermore, I knew what to expect concerning check-in and check-out procedure, availability of toilets, snacks, drinks, pilgrimage passport, and the way in which the 3rd stage was signposted. I expect that this will be similar in the 4th and 5th stage.

I expect that stage four and five are easier to complete than stage 3 as all the participants mentioned that that was the hardest stage through the mountains. The last two parts of the St. Declan's Way would go through less elevated, flat areas where walking shoes are not required, runners would also be suitable. I do have the feeling that these stages will be a lot easier. Though, I have never walked +-55km in two days so I might overestimate myself.


Lastly, during the 3rd stage of the St. Declan’s Way I met a lot of very kind people who were willing to include me in their friend group and let me join them, even if it was just for a while. Knowing the Irish culture, I am also expecting that this will happen during the 4th and 5th stage of the route.

5.2.4 Experience diary stage 4 and 5

Booking flights for stage 4 and 5


Date	20 th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint	I decided to book the second set of flight, which are needed for the last organised event by KMDA; the 4 th and 5 th stage of the St. Declan’s Way. As the plane tickets for two weeks earlier were so expensive, I found myself expecting that these tickets would also end up being around €250,-. In the end the tickets cost half the money I anticipated on.
Actor involved	Aerlingus
Owner of the touchpoint	Independent/external touchpoint
Emotions felt	Relief
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Booking ticket walking event of Knockmealdown stage 4 & 5


Date	20 th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint	Likewise, as with stage 3, I needed to obtain a ticket to participate in the walking event of stage 4 and 5. The website was still easy to use and luckily tickets were still available. I felt that my previous experience with the purchase via this website had influenced my experience as I know already expected and knew the extra information that was provided to me.
Actor involved	Knockmealdown-Active
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand-owned touchpoint
Emotions felt	Positivism, looking forward to the trip. But this touchpoint did not enlarge my excitement.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Booking confirmation walking event stage 4 & 5


Date	20 th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint	Just as with the booking for the ticket of stage 3 I also received a confirmation email with extra information for stage 4 and 5. Also here my previous experience influenced this

	experience as I knew this email was coming, taking away the element of surprise
Actor involved	KMDA
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand-owned touchpoint
Emotions felt	Looking forward to the trip.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	


Searching transportation to start of stage 4: Lismore and 5: Aglish

Date	20 th of March, 2022
Description of touchpoint	When organising transportation for the 3 rd stage of the St. Declan’s Way I became discouraged by the inconvenient and inaccessible location, Stage four and five are even worse. Only the start of this section, Lismore, and the end of stage five, Ardmore, are accessible by public transportation. There is nothing in between, no accommodation, no transportation facilities, nothing. I do not know how where I should stay or how I should arrange everything with public transportation.
Actor involved	Public transportation
Owner of the touchpoint	Independent/external companies
Emotions felt	Hopelessness, anger, anxiety, the assignment is going to be a disaster, I will never get there, why did I think this topic was a good idea?
Peak or valley in customer journey?	


Email contact with John

Date	20 th of April 2022 and onwards
Description of touchpoint	I sent John an email today got in touch with him about interviewing some of the members of KMDA for my master thesis. In the email I reintroduced the topic of my thesis, my research question, aim and relevance. Additionally, I also asked him if he could maybe send me the check-in location of stage 4 and 5 as that would help me with planning my accommodation and transport. John responded very quickly and over that week we had quite a view contact moments regarding the interviews. He introduced me to Frank and Niamh who, as John, were also willing to participate in my research. In that week I also forwarded a consent form, interview guide and executive summary to John.
Actor involved	KMDA and Steering Committee
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand owned
Emotions felt	Relief, cheerful, thankful, and really happy that I had found respondents.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	


Looking for accommodation in Aglish

Date	20 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	After I had sent an email to John, and before I receive a response about the check-in location, I decided to have a look at all the accommodation that is offered in Aglish. It was a very short search there is no accommodation available in Aglish, at least not on Booking.com and Airbnb.
Actor involved	Booking.com and Airbnb.
Owner of the touchpoint	External actors
Emotions felt	I started to feel the stress again. Where should I stay, where can I go to. How should I get to the trail?
Peak or valley in customer journey?	


Looking for accommodation in villages nearby

Date	20 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	I decided not to give up hope yet and I started to look around in the area. I only used Airbnb as that had been the most successful booking platform so far and indeed, I did find an accommodation 3km outside of Aglish. Which is not too bad, I could walk that easily.
Actor involved	Airbnb
Owner of the touchpoint	External actor
Emotions felt	I felt hopeful that everything would turn out and that I would be able to stay here for a night and then move on with my bag to my next accommodation in Ardmore.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	


Looking for public transportation to Aglish

Date	20 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	After finding accommodation just outside of Aglish I decided to have a look at my public transportation possibilities. This search as also very short as there are no busses between Lismore and Ardmore. This means that the 40km between those two locations is not reachable by public transportation. Aglish is also too small to have a taxi service or anything like that. So, I decided that staying in the surroundings of Aglish would not be my most convenient option.
Actor involved	Google Maps, BusEireann, Local Link bus
Owner of the touchpoint	External touchpoints
Emotions felt	Desperation, I really started to doubt if I would ever make it to the start point of stage 4.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Looks for accommodation in Ardmore

Date	20 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	After I gave up searching for accommodation for stage 4, I decided to give my search for accommodation in Ardmore a shot. Ardmore is a relatively larger town in comparison to the others and as it is a coastal town, I was expecting that different types of holiday accommodation would be available. I was wrong. I did not find any accommodation on Airbnb and the accommodation that I found of Booking.com was €4,000 euro for two nights. Which made my choice very easy since I cannot afford that.
Actor involved	Airbnb and Booking.com
Owner of the touchpoint	External actors
Emotions felt	Desperation, anxious, doubtful, panicked as I knew there was also not a lot of accommodation available in the area.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Looks for busses to Ardmore

Date	20 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	I do not know why, but I decided to have a look at the public transportation to Ardmore anyway as I could maybe stay in Youghal or Dungarvan, which are larger towns close to Ardmore. I quickly found out that there are busses between those places. However, they do not run frequently and not very early in the morning. Making it impossible for me to arrive in Ardmore in time for the check-in.
Actor involved	Google Maps, BusEireann, Local Link bus
Owner of the touchpoint	External Actors
Emotions felt	At this time, I felt hopeless, besides not being able to find accommodation and transport for stage 4 I also do not have anything arranged for stage 5. Panicked and very anxious.
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Email contact Niamh

Date	21 st of April 2022 and onwards
Description of touchpoint	I received an email from Niamh who is in the board of directors of the St. Declan's Steering Committee, and she sent me an accommodation recommendation in Tallow at a local guesthouse. She told me that Tallow is a very nice small village that has a lot of amenities for tourists such as pubs, restaurants and a grocery store. Over the week we had email contact about my research, the location of the interview, my consent form as well as that my topic was not very clear to her. She was the one who requested an executive summary of my thesis as well as my interview guide. This made me

nervous as it gave me the feeling that I had misunderstood the organisation or missed important information that I should have included.

Actor involved
Owner of the touchpoint
Emotions felt
Peak or valley in customer journey?

Member of St. Declan's Steering Committee and KMDA Steering Committee and KMDA
Happiness, excitement, nervous.



Email contact Frank

Date
Description of touchpoint

22nd of April, 2022
After receiving the email from Niamh asking about my interview guide and executive summary I decided to get in contact with Frank. Frank is the third person I will interview. I forwarded him my interview guide, executive summary, and consent form. He answered the next day that he understood everything and that all is well.

Actor involved
Owner of the touchpoint
Emotions felt
Peak or valley in customer journey?

Member of KMDA
Brand owned actor
Looking forward to the interview with him.



Guesthouse in Tallow

Date
Description of touchpoint

22nd of April, 2022
After I received the contact details of the guesthouse in Tallow, I first had a look whether the guesthouse had a website. The guesthouse was the first one that popped up after I added the name to the google search bar. Luckily the guesthouse had a personal website as I really like to see pictures of the accommodation that I am booking. On the website I found the phone number and the email address of the guesthouse. I directly sent a mail, and I had a response that very evening.

Actor involved
Owner of the touchpoint
Emotions felt

Guesthouse
Partner
Relief that I had found accommodation, very pleased that the owner of the guesthouse responded so quickly, and excited to stay in this lovely, old-fashioned inn.


Peak or valley in customer journey?




Taxi arrangements

Date
Description of touchpoint


23rd of April, 2022
Today I gave Niall a call. Although I had received his contact details from Niamh earlier this week, I did not find the time to call him in appropriate hours. Sadly, Niall did not pick up the

<p>Actor involved</p> <p>Owner of the touchpoint</p> <p>Emotions felt</p> <p>Peak or valley in customer journey?</p>	<p>phone, so I decided to send him a message via WhatsApp. He responded within a couple of hours, and we set up my whole trip.</p> <p>Taxi driver</p> <p>Partner</p> <p>It really felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders after I spoke to Niall. I finally had most of my trip sorted out.</p> <p></p>
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Looking for public transportation to Tallow


<p>Date</p> <p>Description of touchpoint</p> <p>Actor involved</p> <p>Owner of the touchpoint</p> <p>Emotions felt</p> <p>Peak or valley in customer journey?</p>	<p>24th of April, 2022</p> <p>After sorting out most of my trip earlier this week I decided that it would be useful if I had a look at the time schedule of the busses to Tallow. I again used Google maps to see which routes I could take. I found out that there was actually a bus going every 1,5-hour multiple times a day. That took away the last bit of uncertainty I had. Since the last time travelling by bus went very well, I am expecting that this will be the same this time.</p> <p>Google maps, Bus Eireann, and Local Link bus</p> <p>External touchpoints</p> <p>Relaxed, content</p> <p></p>
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Engaging Facebook posts

<p>Date</p> <p>Description of touchpoint</p> <p>Actor involved</p> <p>Owner of the touchpoint</p> <p>Emotions felt</p> <p>Peak or valley in customer journey?</p>	<p>The weeks before the 4th and 5th stages took place</p> <p>In my first phase of researching the St. Declan’s Way I found the social media channels of this route, which I all followed. I noticed that over the past weeks a bit of media presence on Facebook where KMDA /the Steering committee posted some encouragement post with the aim to attract more people to buy a ticket for their event as well as that they published post keeping the hikers involved with the development of the route and the meetings held. However, these posts were only published on Facebook and not on the other social media channels.</p> <p>KMDA, Steering Committee, Facebook</p> <p>Brand owned and external actor</p> <p>Excitement for walking the trip.</p> <p></p>
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Text with location

<p>Date</p> <p>Description of touchpoint</p>	<p>25th of April, 2022</p> <p>This morning I received a text from KMDA including the start location of the 4th and 5th stage of the route.</p>
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Actor involved	KMDA
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand owned
Emotions felt	Excitement for the trip
Peak or valley in customer journey?	



Information letter on email

Date	25 th of April, 2022
Description of touchpoint	I also receive the email with a detailed overview of the program for the 4 th and 5 th stage of the St. Declan’s Way. This email included information on parking, location and the map to the location, registry, the route, breaks, footwear, weather, gps maps and brochures, medical aid and the check-out. Even though, I knew that I would receive such a letter of information I am still so surprised by the amount of time and effort that is put into these touchpoints. This is one of the things that really adds value to the experience.

Actor involved	KMDA
Owner of the touchpoint	Brand owned
Emotions felt	Amazed, exciting, joy and curious
Peak or valley in customer journey?	

Saturday the 30th of April 2022: The 4th stage of the St. Declan’s Way: Lismore to Aglish

Today the 4th stage of the St. Declan’s Way took place. I arranged with the taxi driver, Niall, that he would pick me up in Tallow at 08:50. He arrived well in time . From the moment I got into the car a very homely feeling got over me. Niall is a very friendly man, he directly started to chat about his life, Tallow as a place of residency and was genuinely interested in the reason why I undertook this trip . While we were in the car, he got a phone call from another woman who also needed a ride to Aglish as she would also walk the St. Declan’s Way. We first drove to mount Melleray where the woman stayed before driving to Aglish. We again needed to sign-in at a community centre located at the end of the stage that we would walk today. The woman we also joined the St. Declan’s Way is named Alex. She is originally from Split in Croatia but has been living in Dublin for 7 years now. She was very chatty, and we directly hit off from a good start and she became to be my walking companion for the upcoming two stages .

Once we arrived at the community centre I got welcomed by John and Christian who stood there to welcome all the arriving hikers that already parked their car, but also to guide cars to Brian who would guide them to the designated parking area . Inside the community hall, the structure of the check-in was similarly structured as in stage 3 . Again, there were three check-in counters based on the alphabetical order of your surname. At the check in you first had to give them your name, which they

checked on a sheet listing all participants. One of the ladies behind the check-in counter recognized me from two weeks ago. Which was really nice, she asked me how I was doing and if I was looking forward to the walk of today 😊. Thereafter, everybody was provided with the same colour wristband, an overview of the program of today including historic backgrounds, lunch breaks, route conditions, etc. and once could grab a map of the area. There was also a snack station provided where they provided free bananas, apples, water, and flapjacks. I took a banana, apple, and bottle of water with me before I went to the passport stamp station where I received a stamp in my pilgrimage passport 😊.

Outside a couple of large touring cars were waiting for us. I think there were about 3 busses, however, I expected that they would drive up and down a couple of times as there were about 200 people participating in today's hike. I was in one of the first busses that departed. This time there was no confusion in regard to the bus division as everybody was wearing the same colour of wristbands 😊.

Once we arrived in Lismore we were guided to the little park in front of Lismore's Heritage Centre where one of the employees of the Heritage Centre awaited us. He has a 5-minute talk prepared on the history of Lismore's Castle. This was an unexpected very enjoyable surprise that added a lot of value to the hike 😊. From there the hike took us past the Black Water River. The first couple of kilometres I walked by myself, enjoying the nature. I must admit that the Irish definition of less elevated flat land is completely different than the Dutch definition. For Dutch standards the area where we were walking through would be described as a hilly landscape 😊.

After a couple of kilometres, I caught up with Christian, one of the stewards of the event who I had seen earlier that morning. I had a nice chat with him about living in Ireland as a foreigner and how we both have the feeling of coming home every time we arrive back in Ireland 😊. After the first 7 kilometres of the route, we had a coffee break in Coppoquin where I bought a cup of tea at a local bakery. Outside of the tearoom I joined Alex who had met Laura and Katherine along the route 😊. Laura could not stop talking about how amazing she thought my generation is. She loved that I came all the way from the Netherlands, to a very off the beaten path location to write my dissertation on a historic walking route. The remaining 14 kilometres I spend with Christian, Alex, Laura, and Katherine. Laura and Katherine are very interested in the historical aspects of the route, and they had a wide knowledge on all artefacts present in the area. I really enjoyed listening to their stories while seeing all the artefacts present in the landscape such as the Dromana Gate 😊.

After 7 kilometres we had a lunch break in Villierstown. In this little town coffee, tea and other drinks and food could be bought in the local supermarket. Additionally, the local pub opened its doors for the hikers where one could use the restroom or buy a pint of Guinness 😊.

After the lunchbreak, we continued the route all together. Not far outside of Villierstown a couple of ancient stones could be found. A signpost at the road, onto which the name of the stones was portrayed, pointed at a field in which the stones could be found. In the field some of the ancient stones were protected by use of a fence, where others were not. Additionally, there was an information sign, but this did not mention the name of the stones nor provided any information on what was incaved in the stones. Which does not make sense to me personally 😞.

I arrived back in Aglish around 16:30 at the community hall. I first signed out, this time there were still three counters where I could sign out. Thereafter I went to the passport station to get a stamp for this stage of the St. Declan's Way 😊. I finished the day with a cup of tea and a sandwich outside that I ate outside of the community hall in the sun 😊. This was also the place where I said goodbye to Christian, Laura, Katherine, and Alex, who I would all see the next day. At 17:00 Niall picked me up and drove me back to my guesthouse safely 😊.

Sunday the 1st of May 2022: The 5th stage of the St. Declan's Way: Aglish to Ardmore

Today I walked the last stage of the St. Declan's Way. This morning Niall picked me up at 09:00 after which we drove through Youghal to Ardmore. The check-in at the St. Declan's community hall opened from 09:30. I arrived a bit later as Niall took me on a wee tourist detour through Yougal to see the ocean 😊. Before arriving at the community hall, we first bumped into Brian who guided the hikers arriving by own transport to the parking area. Because Ardmore is a very touristy, densely built town. It is therefore not enough space in the centre where large numbers of cars can be parked. The parking area was therefore located a bit outside of Ardmore. This field was a 5-minute walk from the St. Declan's community hall 😊.

The check-in had its usual layout, in total there were three check-in registers. I again had to check-in at the last counter. Thereafter, I went to get water, a banana, and an apple again 😊. This time I did not need to stamp my pilgrimage passport as I already got a stamp for this location yesterday 😊. I would receive the final stamp at the end of this walk today. As I was a little bit later, I already missed the first two busses who drove the hikers to the start of this stage in Aglish. Laura, Katherine, Christian and Alex were all in those busses. While walking to the third bus I saw Frank who introduced me to his Belgium

friend. I did not expect to bump into someone who also speaks Dutch (or Flemish). We spoke for a while about his travels to Spain and his experiences with the Camino 😊.

Within half an hour we arrived back at Aglish where the bus dropped us off. Once off the bus, Frank held a small speech in which he explained that the walk of today would mainly cross through fields and makes use of small country roads. However, there were three places in the route where the ancient route of St. Declan could not be followed. Here we had to walk over secondary roads and cross a very busy road 😊.

The first kilometre of the route was an accompanied walk as we walked on the side of a rather busy road. We all were asked to keep our safety in mind and stay as close to the side of the road as possible. At this part stewards were at the beginning and end of the road to warn cars about all the pedestrians that were walking on the road as well as that Frank led this guided walk 😊.

After a kilometre we went into the fields and countryside. For a couple of kilometres, I walked by myself while enjoying the countryside. The nature was so beautiful. It reminded me of the little neighbourhood in which Bilbo from the Hobbit lived 😊. I walked through the nature for about 45 minutes before I came up to the road onto which I had to walk for 2 kilometres. Here again stewards were placed to guide the walkers of the St. Declan's Way as well as warn the cars for the pedestrians 😊.

At the end of the 2 kilometres, just before I wanted to cross the road, I caught up with Alex again. I joined her up till the moment we had lunch. While walking we chatted about her life in Dublin and her homesickness to Croatia and my plans to move to Dublin and study there 😊.

The lunch break was scheduled at a local primary school located in the middle of nowhere. This school was very small, it solely has 51 students, and has a lot of funding and budget problems due to it being a small school. The teachers together with the parents of the children decided to host a sort of charity event/fund raising kind of thing where they would provide a free lunch to all the people walking the St. Declan's Way in exchange for a voluntary donation 😊. Once we arrived at the primary school, the children were all standing outside to greet the hikers and guide them inside 😊. When inside we first entered a hall where toilet facilities were available 😊. In the gym the school had prepared a very long buffet with all sorts of home-made sweets and sandwiches. There was also the possibility to get a cup of tea or coffee 😊. After I got myself a sandwich and a cup of tea, we went into the play yard of the school where they had created different sitting areas by use of all the children their chairs and tables 😊. The sun started shining.

After lunch we had about 10 kilometres to go. The first part was very muddy and slippery due to the rain of the night before 😊. Somewhere at muddy puddle number 10 we caught up with Laura and

Katherine who left with the first bus that morning. Laura had a lot of difficulty manoeuvring through the mud as her shoes kind of decided to collect all the mud. Katherine was very pleased that she managed to get a hold of me as she brought a book that I could use for my thesis as well as that she printed out extra information about the ancient stones that we came across yesterday. The book she gave me was a journal on all the Irish pilgrimage. When I mentioned that I would take photographs on the pages about the St. Declan's Way, she said that I could keep the book and that she hoped that it would bring me a lot of joy. So cute 😊. I joined Katherine and Mary for a little while and I walked the last couple of kilometres with Alex. Just before entering the beach of Ardmore, which were the last couple of meters of the St. Declan's Way. We met Brian again. He asked all the hikers to stand next to the St. Declan's banner for a quick photograph 😊. On the beach itself there was also a photographer to make pictures of all the pilgrims finishing the St. Declan's Way 😊.


Once back in the community centre, I checked out at the third counter, got the last stage of my pilgrimage passport scanned and decided to go on the Cliffwalk with Alex. But first I said goodbye to everyone we had met during the stages 😊.

Alex and I had a lovely lunch at a local restaurant at the corner of the street 😊. After we finished out lunch, we did the 4km long Cliffwalk. This walk is originally a part of the St. Declan's Way, but it is not included in the organised event of KMDA. The Cliffwalk goes by a lot of cultural landmarks related to St. Declan such as the St. Declan's Stone, the St. Declan's Monument, the St. Declan's Well, the St. Declan's Monastery (the remains of it 😊) and it finishes at the round tower located on the Graveyard where St. Declan's is buried 😊. There we met Niamh again who just closed the community hall as all the hikers had finished. We had a small chat, and she took a last photograph of us before we walked back into the town centre, where Niall would pick us up 😊. In front of the community centre, we met Frank and his Belgium friend. They had just finished the walk and were on their way home 😊. Alex and I bought an ice-cream at the corner of the street and waited there till Niall arrived 😊.


Once Niall arrived, we first dropped Alex off at Mount Melleray where she was staying in the Pilgrimage hostel and then he drove me back to my accommodation in Tallow. Where I had a very good night sleep after those two days of walking 😊.

No local bus on a Bank Holiday

Date	2 nd of May, 2022
Description of touchpoint	The next day I was supposed to go with the local link bus to Fermoy, from where I would take a national bus up to Cahir. I would stay in Cahir for a couple of days as a holiday but also to

<p>Actor involved</p> <p>Owner of the touchpoint</p> <p>Emotions felt</p> <p>Peak or valley in customer journey?</p>	<p>meet Frank and John for the interviews. However, after waiting an hour for the bus, I found out that the local bus does not operate on a Bank Holiday. Niall had told me that he only works as a taxi driver during the weekend, so I figured that he probably had a free day or was working at his other job. Anyhow, I decided to give him a ring as I had no other possibility to get to Fermoy other than by taxi.</p> <p>Local link bus</p> <p>External/independent actor</p> <p>Annoyed, not surprised, hopeful that Niall would be so kind to bring me to Fermoy, bit stressed what to do when Niall would not have the time to bring me.</p> <p></p>
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Taxi ride to Fermoy

<p>Date</p> <p>Description of touchpoint</p> <p>Actor involved</p> <p>Owner of the touchpoint</p> <p>Emotions felt</p> <p>Peak or valley in customer journey?</p>	<p>2nd of May, 2022</p> <p>Luckily Niall picked up the phone. He told me that he had to go into Fermoy anyway to do some shopping for the week. He was therefore more than willing to drop me off in Fermoy. It was a very pleasant taxi ride, and we had a conversation about the castles that we drove by. Once in Fermoy I was not allowed to pay for the taxi ride as Niall had to go in anyway. He is so kind.</p> <p>Local taxi driver</p> <p>Partner-owned</p> <p>Happiness, kind, gratitude, relief</p> <p></p>
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2 Email of St. Declan’s Way asking to send photos

<p>Date</p> <p>Description of touchpoint</p>	<p>Sent on the 30th of April and 1st of May 2022, read on 5th of May 2022</p> <p>I received an email from the St. Declan’s Way in which they thanked me for my participation in the walking route. The email is dedicated to stimulating the participants of the event to share their photographs. In the email they do not directly address me, but they wrote the email in 3rd person. So rather than saying, you might have made wonderful pictures during the event, it is stated people might have taken wonderful pictures during the event. I find this kindly encouraging without being persuasive. In the email it is stated via which platforms one can forward the pictures (email, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Seeing those social media platforms made me realise that their social media presence is of a bare minimal. I did find their Facebook page, but I was not aware of</p>
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their Instagram and Twitter account. Additionally, they also describe the hashtags that are linked to the St. Declan's Way. In the second paragraph it is asked to review the event on Trip Advisor. The link to do so is provided in the email. They do however mention that if one did not like the event, they rather receive an email so that they could correct any issues. This is also the part where they introduced the survey that would also be forwarded to the participants of the event. The KMDA team end the email with a direction to their Facebook page to keep informed on information and weather updates.

Actor involved
Owner of the touchpoint
Emotions felt

KMDA
Brand-owned

I wasn't expecting to receive a following up email, so I was rather surprised. I also liked the way in which the email was written. It was stimulating enough without being persuasive.

Peak or valley in customer journey?



2 post-experience mail including survey sent by KMDA

Date

Sent on the 30th of April and 1st of May 2022, read on the 5th of May 2022

Description of touchpoint

I received an email from KMDA which included a link to an online survey. The request was very short 'Will you take a moment to complete this survey, it won't take long'. The survey comprised of 15 questions (this is an estimation as I cannot longer open the survey) asking about my experience along the St. Declan's Way, where I am from and how I found the trail.

Actor involved
Owner of the touchpoint
Emotions felt

KMDA and SurveySparrow
Brand owned touchpoint

Happy that I could help KMDA out by use of this survey

Peak or valley in customer journey?



Email to say thank you

Date

5th of May, 2022

Description of touchpoint

After I filled out the survey, I received a thankyou letter.

Actor involved

KMDA and SurveySparrow

Owner of the touchpoint

Brand owned touchpoints

Emotions felt

I liked that KMDA sent a thank you email

Peak or valley in customer journey?



Appendix 5.3: ServQual Assessment Form

5 = Strongly agree

4 = Agree

3 = Neutral

2 = Disagree

1 = Strongly disagree

0 = Not applicable

Main component	Variables	Score
Reliability	The service is provided as promised	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA/volunteers handles the customer's service problem in accuracy	5 4 3 2 1 0
	The service is provided in the right manner the first time	5 4 3 2 1 0
	The service is provided in the promised time frame	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA volunteers has an error-free record	5 4 3 2 1 0
Responsiveness	KMDA /volunteers keeps the tourist informed about when services will be provided	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers delivers fast customer service	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to help the tourists	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to respond to tourists' enquiries	5 4 3 2 1 0
Assurance	KMDA /volunteers instil confidence in the tourists	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers make tourist feel safe and secure	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are friendly and courteous	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers have the knowledge to respond and provide an answer to the questions tourist pose	5 4 3 2 1 0
Empathy	KMDA /volunteers give each tourist individual attention	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are caring	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers have the tourists' interest at heart	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers understand the wants and needs of the tourists	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers operates in convenient business hours	5 4 3 2 1 0
Tangibles	KMDA /volunteers makes use of modern equipment	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers have visually appealing facilities	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are neat, presentable, and professional	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers makes use of appealing materials related to the provided service	5 4 3 2 1 0

5.3.1 ServQual framework actual experience stage 3

Main component	Variables	Score
Pre-experience stage		
Reliability	The service is provided as promised; booking system works, availability of information on the route, engaging online presence, useful website.	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers handles the tourist's service problem in accuracy	5 4 3 2 1 0
	The service is provided in the right manner the first time; the right information got provided the first time, so no follow-up text or emails are needed	5 4 3 2 1 0
	The service is provided in the promised time frame; information email and text are received before the event takes place	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers has an error-free record	5 4 3 2 1 0
Responsiveness	KMDA /volunteers keeps the tourist informed about when services will be provided; via email, text, or social media	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers delivers fast tourist service; quickly (within 2 days) responses to email, text, questions asked via social media platforms	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to respond to tourists' enquiries; response to text, email or questions posed on social media.	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to help the tourists; the response on text, email, or social media is extensive and helpful and does answer the question posed.	5 4 3 2 1 0
Assurance	KMDA /volunteers instil confidence in the tourists	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers make tourist feel safe and secure	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are friendly and courteous: in the email, text, and other online contact that occurs the tone of voice is friendly.	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers have the knowledge to respond and provide an answer to the questions tourist pose	5 4 3 2 1 0
Empathy	KMDA /volunteers give each tourist individual attention	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are caring	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers have the tourists' interest at heart	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers understand the wants and needs of the tourists	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers operates in convenient business hours	5 4 3 2 1 0
Tangibles	KMDA /volunteers makes use of modern equipment; social media, website, online booking platform	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers has visually appealing facilities; Website and social media look appealing	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers are neat, presentable, and professional	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers makes use of appealing materials related to the provided service: website, social media	5 4 3 2 1 0
Experience stage		
Reliability	The service is provided as promised: there are signs, trail furniture, clear guidance from the stewards present.	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers handles the tourist's service problem in accuracy	5 4 3 2 1 0
	The service is provided in the right manner the first time; there are no gaps in the experience identified	5 4 3 2 1 0
	The service is provided in the promised time frame; the events duration is similar to what has been said in the information letter.	5 4 3 2 1 0
	KMDA /volunteers has an error-free record	5 4 3 2 1 0

Responsiveness	KMDA /volunteers keeps the tourist informed about when services will be provided: this can be done by an announcement	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA volunteers delivers fast tourist service	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to help the tourists; volunteers guide people in the right direction, are willing to answer questions	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to respond to tourists' enquiries; diet wishes, need for extra help.	5	4	3	2	1	0
Assurance	KMDA /volunteers instil confidence in the tourists; encouraging statements along the way.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers make tourist feel safe and secure; health statements, safety briefing, guidance at busy roads and junctions, pickup when people are falling behind.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are friendly and courteous	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the knowledge to respond and provide an answer to the questions tourist pose	5	4	3	2	1	0
Empathy	KMDA /volunteers give each tourist individual attention	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are caring	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the tourists' interest at heart	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers understand the wants and needs of the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers operates in convenient business hours: the volunteers are present at the location when the first tourist arrives, and they are the last to leave.	5	4	3	2	1	0
Tangibles	KMDA /volunteers makes use of modern equipment: online registry, online maps, QR codes.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have visually appealing facilities: community centre used, food truck, food station.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are neat, presentable, and professional	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers makes use of appealing materials related to the provided service: walking notes, jackets	5	4	3	2	1	0
Post-experience							
Reliability	The service is provided as promised	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers handles the tourist's service problem in accuracy	5	4	3	2	1	0
	The service is provided in the right manner the first time	5	4	3	2	1	0
	The service is provided in the promised time frame	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers has an error-free record	5	4	3	2	1	0
Responsiveness	KMDA /volunteers keeps the tourist informed about when services will be provided: Email enlisting for future events	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers delivers fast tourist service	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to help the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to respond to tourists' enquiries	5	4	3	2	1	0
Assurance	KMDA /volunteers instil confidence in the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are friendly and courteous	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are friendly and courteous	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the knowledge to respond and provide an answer to the questions tourist pose	5	4	3	2	1	0
Empathy	KMDA /volunteers give each tourist individual attention	5	4	3	2	1	0

	KMDA /volunteers are caring	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the tourists' interest at heart	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers understand the wants and needs of the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers operates in convenient business hours	5	4	3	2	1	0
Tangibles	KMDA /volunteers makes use of modern equipment: post email survey, follow-up email asking for photos, posts on the internet, email list.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have visually appealing facilities	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are neat, presentable, and professional	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers makes use of appealing materials related to the provided service: post email survey, follow-up email asking for photos, posts on the internet, email list.	5	4	3	2	1	0

5.3.2 ServQual framework actual experience stage 4 and 5

Main component	Variables	Score					
Pre-experience stage							
Reliability	The service is provided as promised; booking system works, availability of information on the route, engaging online presence, useful website.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers handles the tourist's service problem in accuracy	5	4	3	2	1	0
	The service is provided in the right manner the first time; the right information got provided the first time, so no follow-up text or emails are needed	5	4	3	2	1	0
	The service is provided in the promised time frame; information email and text are received before the event takes place	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers has an error-free record	5	4	3	2	1	0
Responsiveness	KMDA /volunteers keeps the tourist informed about when services will be provided; via email, text, or social media	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers delivers fast tourist service; quickly (within 2 days) responses to email, text, questions asked via social media platforms	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to respond to tourists' enquiries; response to text, email or questions posed on social media.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to help the tourists; the response on text, email, or social media is extensive and helpful and does answer the question posed.	5	4	3	2	1	0
Assurance	KMDA /volunteers instil confidence in the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers make tourist feel safe and secure	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are friendly and courteous: in the email, text, and other online contact that occurs the tone of voice is friendly.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the knowledge to respond and provide an answer to the questions tourist pose	5	4	3	2	1	0
Empathy	KMDA /volunteers give each tourist individual attention	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are caring	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the tourists' interest at heart	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers understand the wants and needs of the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers operates in convenient business hours	5	4	3	2	1	0
Tangibles	KMDA /volunteers makes use of modern equipment; social media, website, online booking platform	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers has visually appealing facilities; Website and social media look appealing	5	4	3	2	1	0

	KMDA /volunteers are neat, presentable, and professional	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers makes use of appealing materials related to the provided service: website, social media	5	4	3	2	1	0
Experience stage							
Reliability	The service is provided as promised: there are signs, trail furniture, clear guidance from the stewards present.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers handles the tourist's service problem in accuracy	5	4	3	2	1	0
	The service is provided in the right manner the first time; there are no gaps in the experience identified	5	4	3	2	1	0
	The service is provided in the promised time frame; the events duration is similar to what has been said in the information letter.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers has an error-free record	5	4	3	2	1	0
Responsiveness	KMDA /volunteers keeps the tourist informed about when services will be provided: this can be done by an announcement	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA volunteers delivers fast tourist service	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to help the tourists; volunteers guide people in the right direction, are willing to answer questions	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to respond to tourists' enquiries; diet wishes, need for extra help.	5	4	3	2	1	0
Assurance	KMDA /volunteers instil confidence in the tourists; encouraging statements along the way.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers make tourist feel safe and secure; health statements, safety briefing, guidance at busy roads and junctions, pickup when people are falling behind.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are friendly and courteous	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the knowledge to respond and provide an answer to the questions tourist pose	5	4	3	2	1	0
Empathy	KMDA /volunteers give each tourist individual attention	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are caring	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the tourists' interest at heart	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers understand the wants and needs of the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers operates in convenient business hours: the volunteers are present at the location when the first tourist arrives, and they are the last to leave.	5	4	3	2	1	0
Tangibles	KMDA /volunteers makes use of modern equipment: online registry, online maps, QR codes.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have visually appealing facilities: community centre used, food truck, food station.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are neat, presentable, and professional	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers makes use of appealing materials related to the provided service: walking notes, jackets	5	4	3	2	1	0
Post-experience							
Reliability	The service is provided as promised	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers handles the tourist's service problem in accuracy	5	4	3	2	1	0
	The service is provided in the right manner the first time	5	4	3	2	1	0
	The service is provided in the promised time frame	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers has an error-free record	5	4	3	2	1	0

Responsiveness	KMDA /volunteers keeps the tourist informed about when services will be provided: Email enlisting for future events	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers delivers fast tourist service	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to help the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are willing to respond to tourists' enquiries	5	4	3	2	1	0
Assurance	KMDA /volunteers instil confidence in the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are friendly and courteous	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are friendly and courteous	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the knowledge to respond and provide an answer to the questions tourist pose	5	4	3	2	1	0
Empathy	KMDA /volunteers give each tourist individual attention	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are caring	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have the tourists' interest at heart	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers understand the wants and needs of the tourists	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers operates in convenient business hours	5	4	3	2	1	0
Tangibles	KMDA /volunteers makes use of modern equipment: post email survey, follow-up email asking for photos, posts on the internet, email list.	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers have visually appealing facilities	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers are neat, presentable, and professional	5	4	3	2	1	0
	KMDA /volunteers makes use of appealing materials related to the provided service: post email survey, follow-up email asking for photos, posts on the internet, email list.	5	4	3	2	1	0

Appendix 5.4: Consent form

Introduction to research

Hi, my name is Lisa van der Lem. I study Cultural Geography at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. For my master's thesis, I am conducting research on the St. Declan's Way. The aim of this research is to identify how the customer journey from an experiential perspective can contribute to the improvement of the planned customer experience along the St. Declan's Way, Ireland. To understand the planned customer experience, I would like to ask you a couple of questions regarding your position in Knockmealdown Active/Steering Committee, the St. Declan's Way, and the customer touchpoints Knockmealdown Active/Steering Committee incorporated into the route.

Before you decide to participate in this research, it is important that you understand what your participation will involve and how the interview process is planned. Please read the following information carefully. If any questions arise, feel free to contact me at the following email address or phone number: lisavanderlem@hotmail.nl or +31650806626.

Voluntary participation

Participation in this research is on a voluntary basis, meaning that it is entirely up to you to decide if you would like to participate in this research. If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to sign this consent form. The research remains on a voluntary basis, so even when you sign the consent form, you are not obliged to participate in this research, and you can withdraw at any time. This has no consequences. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the data that you provided is deleted, and you are not required to provide an explanation for your decision. I value your participation and I will strive to make it an enjoyable experience.

Interview procedure

It is expected that the duration of the interview will be between 15-20 minutes. The date and location of the interview will depend on your preference. During the interview, a voice recorder will be used, allowing the researcher to recall upon the provided data. The interview is structured by the use of a funnel structure in which we first touch upon your involvement in Knockmealdown Active/Steering Committee and the St. Declan's Way. Thereafter, we will go in depth on the experience of the St. Declan's Way and the customer touchpoints Knockmealdown Active/Steering Committee set out during the different stages

of the customer journey. An example of a question that is included in the interview is: What makes the St. Declan's Way different from other hiking trails in Ireland?

For this research, I prepared a set of interview questions based on literature. If you would like to discuss different topics that are not included in the interview, please feel free to introduce these topics.

Privacy and confidentiality

If you feel uncomfortable during the interview or when you need more time to think about the answer to a question, please feel free to take your time or opt for a break. The recordings made during the interview will be stored on a password-protected device and will only be accessible to the researcher. Once the interview is transcribed, the recording is to be deleted from all devices. Moreover, your anonymity is of the utmost importance. Therefore, all sensitive data and personal information that could reveal your identity is removed from the transcript, as well as that your name is replaced by a pseudonym.

Consent

I have carefully read and understood the information provided above. I have been given enough time to think about my participation and I have had the opportunity to ask questions. I agree that the interview will be recorded, and I am of the understanding that I am free to withdraw from this research at any time. I give permission that the interview data will be used for this master's thesis.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix 5.5: Categorization of touchpoints and their channels

Touchpoint elements	Definition	Possible touchpoints
Atmospheric	The physical characteristics and surrounding tourists observe when interacting with any part of the service provider	Weather: sunny, dry, rain, cold, wind, snow Cultural elements: landmarks, ruins, cathedrals, monasteries, folklore, music Natural elements: lake, mountains, hills, fields, trees Smells Sounds
Technological	A tourist's direct interaction with any form of technology during an encounter with the service provider	Email Website Social Media Online GPS map Digital registry at start and finish Online timetables of the busses Google maps to find start of the route Use website to book tickets TripAdvisor for reviews Google maps to find the bus times to the villages Website to book tickets for walking event
Communicative	One-way communication forms the service provider to tourist, including promotional and informational messages	Channels: Email/ Text/ Phone call/ paper handouts Face-to-face conversations Information: Information leaflet Interpretive panels along the way Newsletters Booking-update Route
Process	The actions or steps tourists need to take to achieve a particular outcome with the service provider	Book tickets Provide contact details Read information email Travel to check-in point Park car Sign in for the walk
Service provider-Tourist interaction	The direct and indirect interactions tourists have with the service provider when interacting with any part of the service	Private text to personalise the service Welcome talk at start of the route Guiding face-to-face information Signing up at the start Face-to-face communication during the route Service provision: water, snacks, walking notes, etc.

Tourist-Tourist interaction	The direct and indirect interactions tourists have with other tourist when interacting with any part of the service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waiting at the parking lot of crèche for pickup service Jointly starting the St. Declan's Way Meeting other hikers along the way Having a chat at the water provision points Meeting hikers after the finish point
Product interaction	The direct and indirect interactions tourists have with the core tangible and intangible services offered by the service provider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Toilet service Sign-ins Information points Water provision Telephone service Sign posting Shuttle bus service Emergency/first aid posts

Appendix 5.6: Coding stages

Codes	Categories	Themes
5A model (Reitsamer, Brunner-Sperdin, & Stockburger-Sauer, 2016; Forlani, Ferrucci, & Picciotti, 2021). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attractions • Accessibility • Accommodation • Amenities • Activities 	Destination image	Components of a tourist experience
ServQual method (Parasuraman, Zeithalm, & Berry, 1994). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliability • Responsiveness • Assurance • Empathy • Tangibles 	Tourist expectation and satisfaction	
Stages of the customer journey (Dhebar, 2013; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rosenbaum, Otolara, & Ramirez, 2016; Voorhees, et al., 2017). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-experience • Experience • Post-experience 	Tourist journey	Structure of holistic tourist journey (Page & Connell, 2014)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand-owned: KMDA • Brand-owned: Steering Committee • Partner-owned • Customer-owned • External/independent actor (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) 	Touchpoint owners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atmospheric • Technological • Communicative • Process • Service provider-tourist interactions • Tourist-tourist interactions • Product-interaction (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016) 	Touchpoint elements	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missing touchpoints 	Gaps in tourist journey	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community groups • Interdependence • Responsibility KMDA • Responsibility Steering Committee 	Organisational structure St. Declan's Way	