



Research Note

Comfortable experiences in nature accommodation: Perceived service quality in Glamping



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ABSTRACT

Glamping – a combination of the words ‘glamour’ and ‘camping’ – is an emergent concept in camping that combines comfort with direct contact with nature. This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of consumers’ perceptions of services provided by glamping facilities. A measurement tool, GlampingExp – Glamping Experience, was developed for this purpose using a mixed methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research. Portugal is the target for this study. A content analysis of guest reviews was performed first, followed by in-depth interviews with glamping managers, in order to develop a battery of items to assess glamping experiences from the guests’ perspective. A quantitative survey (N =166) was then conducted. Exploratory factor analysis revealed that service quality in this sector is multidimensional, including five facets: tangibles, staff, nature-based experiences, food and activities. A better understanding of clients’ evaluations has strategic implications for any services designed to meet guests’ needs. Therefore, this paper expands the existing body of research on glamping, focusing on guests’ perspectives on dimensions of service quality in this type of accommodation.

Management Implications:

1. The present study has important implications for managers of glamping facilities.
2. Managers can use the measurement tool, GlampingExp – Glamping Experience, to assess their performance based on their score for each dimension, as follows: tangibles, staff, nature-based experiences, food; and activities.
3. In order to match the guests’ concept of glamorous camping, eco-tangibles are of utmost importance.
4. As extra activities and food are a component of good experiences, facilities need to provide package offers to guests.
5. Properties should provide nature-based experiences that offer guests a relaxing, tranquil stay in an authentic setting. Guests also value the hospitality of the staff.

1. Introduction

Outdoor hospitality and nature-based tourism have been increasingly in demand in recent years (O’Neill, Riscinto Kozub, & Hyfte, 2010). Consumers perceive nature-based experiences as allowing them to escape from urban settings and enjoy the company of their family or friends in natural settings while doing relaxing activities. According to Dwyer and Edwards (2000), researchers consider quality the most important factor in successful nature-based tourism development.

Camping is a popular form of nature-based tourism (O’Neil et al., 2010). Camping – a broadly-defined form of outdoor recreation that is simultaneously an activity and accommodation – has evolved from basic tents to more luxurious offerings, such as glamping. Glamping, a

lexical blend of ‘glamorous’ and ‘camping’, offers outdoor lovers an ‘outdoor hotel’ experience by removing the discomforts associated with outdoor experiences. Glamping is thus a transitional form between outdoor and indoor hospitality whereby entrepreneurs have innovated by combining comfortable accommodations with outdoor experiences. Despite camping’s popularity and an increasingly diverse offering (e.g. glamping), camping has received minimal attention in the literature. As Brooker and Joppe (2013) note, ‘The emergence of glamping [has created] an area in need of academic research.’ To satisfy this need in part, the present study sought to identify the main dimensions of glamping tourism.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section offers an overview of the nature-based tourism concept, the development of

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Glamping products and the nature-based perspectives of service quality. Then, the methodology section context contains an overview of the research context (i.e., Glamping properties located in Portugal) and of the mixed methods employed in this study. The results present the major finding of the content analysis and of the survey. Finally, the paper offers the conclusions, managerial implications, limitations and avenues for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Nature-based tourism

Nature-based tourism is an extremely broadly defined, comprehensive term that encompasses all forms of tourism where nature or the outdoors is the primary attraction or setting (Coghlan & Buckley, 2012). This term is applied particularly whenever nature is in an undisturbed or pristine state (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2002). Vespestad and Lindberg (2010) propose four ontological perspectives on this tourism subsector: a search for self, a form of entertainment, a state of being and a form of social affiliation. Nature-based tourism, thus, includes activities based on a passive enjoyment of scenery, geology, flora and fauna; outdoor recreation and adventure; consumptive uses such as hunting and fishing; and volunteer contributions to conservation or research (Coghlan, 2007).

Nature-based tourism is, therefore, a large, heterogeneous product subsector that is further subdivisible and that overlaps with several related concepts and subsectors (Coghlan & Buckley, 2012). It embraces several social constructions and contexts, leading to diverse commercial tourism products and to the growth of the subsector as a whole (Buckley, 2009). A specialised offer within this subsector, ecotourism, has already received considerable attention in the literature (e.g. Ban & Ramsaran, 2016; Buckley, 2009). Academic and government definitions of ecotourism mention nature-based products, minimal-impact management, environmental education and contributions to conservation (Coghlan & Buckley, 2012). Ecotourism can thus be seen as a unique subset of nature-based tourism that is consistent with 'natural, social and community values and [that] allows both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interactions and shared experiences' (Eadington & Smith, 1992, p. 3).

Motivated by push and pull factors commonly found in tourism, an increasing number of tourists are communing with nature in their recreational activities (O'Neill et al., 2010). Tourists perceive several benefits from nature-based tourism, such as escape, knowledge gained about nature, health enhancement and social cohesiveness (Palacio & McCool, 1997). Tian-Cole, Crompton, and Wilson (2002) study of a wildlife refuge also identified nature appreciation and/or education, achievement, introspection and/or nostalgia, escape, physical fitness and encounters with new people as benefits of nature-based experiences. These perceived benefits of nature-based tourism measure the quality of experiences, functioning as strong predictors of tourists' overall positive responses, including loyalty (Moore, Rodger, & Taplin, 2015).

2.2. Glamping

Nature-based tourism has become increasingly popular, and camping, in particular, is the outdoor vacation activity most often enjoyed by people around the world (O'Neill et al., 2010). This outdoor hospitality subsector has now evolved from basic tent camping to include caravans, recreational vehicles and luxury offerings (Brooker & Joppe, 2013). This subsector, especially campsites, has continued to improve its offer, enhancing guests' comfort levels, offering several levels of amenities, providing opulent facilities that create a resort atmosphere and integrating personal wellness into outdoor hospitality experiences (Brooker & Joppe, 2013).

The growing demand for comfort and luxury in this subsector has

led to the growth of glamping products. Glamping, a lexical blend of 'glamorous' and 'camping', is an upscale format that gives tourists an outdoor experience with some of the comforts of a fine hotel. Glamping removes the discomforts and inconveniences of tent camping and replaced them with pre-erected, homelike accommodations (Boscoboinik & Bourquard, 2011). These are often equipped with luxury beds, quality linens, rugs, antique furnishings and sleek, modern bathrooms (Brooker & Joppe, 2013), as well as kitchens, televisions, wi-fi service and, sometimes, housekeeping (Miller & Washington, 2014).

Glamping is now referred to by some sources as an outdoor hotel experience (Union Lido, 2012) including, among other facilities, yurts, campgrounds, treehouses and double-decker buses converted into accommodations. Glamping results in higher occupancy rates, higher price points (White & White, 2004) and new consumer patronage. The concept has recently evolved into an acceptable, mainstream and even 'cool' outdoor hospitality undertaking (Brooker & Joppe, 2013).

2.3. Service quality

Researchers consider quality the most important factor in successful nature-based tourism development (Dwyer & Edwards, 2000). Perceptions of service quality in nature-based tourism are important because of how they influence loyalty (Moore et al., 2015). This subsection, therefore, offers an overview of conceptualisations of service quality and examples of empirical studies that have focused on service quality in the nature-based tourism subsector.

2.3.1. Conceptualisation

The literature on services marketing suggests that customer orientation puts clients at the core of organisations' purpose and activities, as managers continuously strive to meet customers' expectations, ensure overall satisfaction and influence future behavioural intentions (O'Neill et al., 2010). To do this, service providers need to understand clients' perceptions of service encounters as a prerequisite for delivering superior services (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1988) and remaining competitive and profitable (McMullan & Gilmore, 2003; O'Neill et al., 2010).

Service quality is usually conceptualised as a multidimensional structure made up of a variety of factors, rather than a one-dimensional concept. In order to understand service quality, different service characteristics need to be analysed. Establishing the nature of service quality dimensions is an inseparable part of the development of measurement instruments (Albacete-Sáez, Fuentes-Fuentes, & Lloréns-Montes, 2007), so extensive service quality research has been devoted in recent decades to the development of service quality measures.

In the relevant literature, Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) work has had the greatest impact through the SERVQUAL instrument, which has come to be regarded as a basic tool and widely applied and lauded by academics and managers. SERVQUAL is based on the premise that consumers evaluate service quality by comparing their expectations of service to be received with their perceptions of service actually received. This model includes five dimensions defined through factor analysis: tangibles (i.e. appearance of physical facilities, equipment and personnel), reliability (i.e. ability to perform expected services dependably and accurately), responsiveness (i.e. helpfulness and promptness), assurance (i.e. courtesy, trust and competence) and empathy (i.e. caring about and understanding customer needs).

Numerous contributions to the literature have sought to establish which criteria or factors consumers consider when evaluating service quality, as well as the latter concept's relevant dimensions. As a result, a substantial number of studies have examined the concept of service quality, its diverse facets and the methods that measure it.

Despite the widespread use of the SERVQUAL model to measure service quality, several theoretical and empirical analyses of the

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