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## Challenging conventional wisdom: Positive waiting<sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Call to re-examine the conventional wisdom that waiting for service is negative.
- Forwards 5 propositions on the positive effects of waiting in tourism.
- Calls for research on waiting to take on a renewed exploratory role.
- Research should examine the tipping point, where positive waiting turns negative.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper calls for a re-examination of the conventional wisdom that making consumers wait for service is necessarily negative. This is important because after three decades of research on waiting, consumers still spend a considerable amount of time waiting, in an ever-widening range of contexts. And although there is a continuous and steady stream of waiting studies, there have been few significant advances in our understanding in recent years. We forward a set of challenging propositions that consider the positive effects of waiting. In contrast to established thinking, we propose that waiting attracts more consumers; increases perceived value; provides information to facilitate consumer decision-making; improves customer evaluations; and encourages positive anticipation. The propositions are supported theoretically and empirically by drawing on related disciplines. With this paper, we aim to stimulate new and innovative discussion around the topic of waiting, with particular emphasis on waiting in tourism services, and to question accepted knowledge in order to begin laying the basis for the next phase of research on consumer waiting.

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## 1. Introduction

In order to advance our understanding of the challenges facing management, every so often researchers are called upon to question conventional wisdom, to re-examine the evidence and to re-evaluate the obvious solutions (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011).

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Waiting in services has been studied extensively and consistently across a range of disciplines including operations research, services marketing and consumer behavior (Hornik, 1984; Maister, 1985; Jones & Peppiatt, 1996; Pàmies, Ryan, & Valverde, 2016b). The fundamental premise of waiting research is that the longer consumers wait, the less favorable they will evaluate services (Taylor, 1995). Therefore, the almost singular end-goal of waiting research is to reduce waiting times. Yet, despite a considerable and sustained research effort over three decades and an extensive literature on waiting, consumers are still devoting a considerable portion of their time to waiting for service (Giebelhausen, Robinson, & Cronin, 2011). This includes waiting in an increasing range of situations, with more recent incorporations including waiting on the telephone (Munichor & Rafaeli, 2007; Mehrotra, Ross, Ryder, & Zhou, 2012) waiting on the Internet (Ryan & Valverde, 2005, 2006; Lee, Chen, & Llie, 2012) and waiting in virtual environments (Hwang,

Yoon, & Bendle, 2012).

Indeed, it is our contention that research on consumer waiting over the previous decade has become entrenched in the existing paradigm, with little scope for new or innovative thinking on the issues. We suggest that notwithstanding the continual flow of new waiting studies, we are consistently revisiting the same research questions we have considered since the early 1990s. Though we are examining waiting in new and innovative service environments, such as waiting on the Internet (Ryan, Pàmies, & Valverde, 2015), in self-service technologies (Kokkinou & Cranage, 2015) and virtual queues (Hwang et al., 2012; Brown, Kappes, & Marks, 2013), we are dealing with the same issues; such as, tolerance for waiting and how it is affected by personal characteristics, the service environment (Borges, Herter, & Chebat, 2015), situational factors (Demoulin & Djelassi, 2013), multistage waiting (Kim, Miao, & Magnini, 2013), and filling the wait (Hong, Hess, & Hardin, 2013). All of this is based on the fundamental premise that the longer consumers are forced to wait, the more negative their corresponding reaction. We propose that it is time to reconsider our approach to waiting, to reevaluate the fundamental tenets of our research, in order to begin opening up new approaches to the study of the waiting consumer.

Despite the emphasis on the negative aspects of waiting in research and the pervasiveness of waiting in contemporary society, there are grounds to support a positive interpretation of waiting. However, the literature that has identified positive aspects of waiting is unconnected and scattered across a range of disciplines. The aim of this paper is to bring together the empirical evidence and theoretical support on this topic in order to propose a positive interpretation of waiting that challenges the dominant view that waiting should be eliminated or reduced. In this paper we do not deny the “waiting is negative” paradigm, or the common-sense approach that waiting can be frustrating. However, we do indeed challenge the widely held view that the only solution to the problems associated with waiting is to reduce the wait. We also note that although common sense suggests that consumers would prefer not to wait, research demonstrates that even faced with a choice between queues, consumers will often join the longer queue.

The tourism experience is especially prone to long and repeated delays and waiting (Dickson, Ford, & Laval, 2005; Moore, 2007; Pearce, 1989). Consequently, there is considerable academic research on waiting in the context of airports (Dawes & Rowley, 1996; Rendeiro Martín-Cejas, 2006; Minton, 2008; De Lange, Samoilovich, & van der Rhee, 2013), restaurants (Davis & Heineke, 1998; Dickson et al., 2005; Hensley & Sulek, 2007; Sulek & Hensley, 2004) theme parks (Ahmadi, 1997) and cultural attractions (Gnoth, Bigné, & Andreu, 2006; Riganti & Nijkamp, 2008; Rowley, 1999). As tourists we wait in line at airports to check-in, to board the airplane, to get off the plane, to collect luggage, to go through emigration or passport control and to find a taxi to take us to our hotel, where we often wait again to check in. During our vacations, we wait at restaurants, theatres, museums and theme parks. Indeed, a typical visit to a popular theme park may involve more time waiting than time experiencing the rides and attractions (Heger, Offermans, & Frens, 2009). Tourism and hospitality operations make decisions on capacity and demand management, striving to balance guest satisfaction and comfort with operational efficiency (Pullman & Thompson, 2002). Therefore, waiting is an ubiquitous part of the contemporary tourist experience (Dawes & Rowley, 1996; Gilbert & Wong, 2003; Gnoth et al., 2006) and a major concern for management as research suggests that waiting may have a considerable negative effect on tourist satisfaction

(Dickson et al., 2005).

The aim of this paper is to advance our understanding of waiting behavior by reconsidering the conventional wisdom that the only solution to waiting is to minimize it. By highlighting some of the positive interpretations that waiting evokes, new perspectives and more appropriate solutions to this enduring issue may emerge. We do this by forwarding a series of propositions that contemplate the potentially positive effects of waiting for companies. We do not contest the widely held view that consumers do not like to wait, but we argue that under certain conditions consumers may willingly wait and may even choose a longer wait over a shorter wait. In contrast to conventional thinking, we propose that waiting may attract *more* consumers, increase perceived value, provide information to facilitate consumer decision-making, improve customer evaluations and encourage positive anticipation. We base these propositions on theories and concepts drawn from a range of disciplines and we support them with empirical evidence drawn from existing studies. We conceptualize these propositions as ‘positive waiting’.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Firstly, we review the literature on waiting in services in order to consider the pervasive emphasis on the negative aspects of waiting. We examine the strategies designed to reduce both real and perceived waiting times. We then consider the grounds for questioning the conventional wisdom on waiting and we set forth a series of propositions based on a positive conceptualization of waiting. Finally, the implications and suggestions for future research are outlined.

## 2. Waiting in services

Studies show that waiting can reduce customer satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Chang & Yang, 2008; Davis & Heineke, 1994; Lee & Lambert, 2006; Hensley & Sulek, 2007; Li, 2010). Therefore, research in marketing almost always interprets waiting as a problem. Indeed, it is generally accepted that waiting is universally disliked by consumers, regardless of culture (Rose, Evaristo, & Straub, 2003; Pàmies, Ryan, & Valverde, 2016a, 2016b). Time spent waiting is considered wasted time (Fung, 2006) because it is a scarce resource that could be used for something more productive (Leclerc, Schmitt, & Dube, 1995). Waiting makes consumers feel bored, annoyed, agitated and irritated (Rafaeli, Barron, & Haber, 2002; Taylor, 1994; Pruyn & Smidts, 1998; Larson, 1987). As the wait often occurs at the beginning of a service encounter, it is frequently the first experience customers have with companies (McGuire, Kimes, Lynn, Pullman, & Lloyd, 2010; Davis & Heineke, 1998). Therefore, initial delays may have a considerable and enduring negative effect on the overall evaluation of a service (Dickson et al., 2005; Lee & Lambert, 2000; Pruyn & Smidts, 1998; Taylor, 1994; Hui & Tse, 1996). Sometimes consumers will simply abandon a service rather than wait (Carmon, Shanthikumar, & Carmon, 1995; Friedman & Friedman, 1997; Zhou & Soman, 2003), and even if they decide to endure a wait, they may avoid that service on future occasions (Carmon et al., 1995; Bielen & Demoulin, 2007; Davis & Vollmann, 1990; McDougall & Levesque, 1999). Therefore, researchers and practitioners endeavor to design services that reduce or eliminate waiting times (Hui & Tse, 1996; Kostecki, 1996; Yan & Lotz, 2006).

However, consumers often do not accurately calculate how long they wait. In this sense, we can differentiate between the time a consumer *perceives* they wait and the actual, objective or *real* time they wait (Jones & Peppiatt, 1996). Real or objective waiting times are reduced by extending opening hours, operating at maximum capacity level, opening more checkouts or employing more service

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