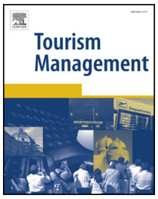
Tourism Management 69 (2018) 214–222

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Tourism Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tourman



Contemplating museums' service failure: Extracting the service quality dimensions of museums from negative on-line reviews

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Museum tourism
Museum management
On-line review
Service failure
Service quality
Social media
TripAdvisor
Visitor experience

ABSTRACT

Museums are important attractions in contemporary cultural tourism, which has brought them economic benefit as well as managerial challenges. Museums' mandate of custodianship and curatorial and educational focus on tangible artifacts and facilities has been diverted to and augmented by the intangible memories, emotions, and experiences of visitors and tourists. Identifying museum service failures from social media is complementary to, rather than a contradiction of, museum visitor satisfaction assessment. This study, through adoption of interdisciplinary literature, has extracted twelve service qualities— assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles, empathy, communication, consumables, convenience, servicescape, purposiveness, contemplation, and first-hand experience—as grounds for contemplating conception and operation of museum tourism as well as consumer-based museum servicescapes.

1. Introduction

Despite visitor numbers for some iconic museums of the world declining in 2016, cultural tourism has brought tourists flocking to museums over the last two decades. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009) has indicated that cultural tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing global tourism markets; the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS) has revealed that museums are the most important attractions, accounting for over 50 percent of all cultural tourist visits (Richards, 2007). This growth has thus resulted in increasing museum visitations.

Museums have been the economic beneficiary of this influx of tourists, due to increased accountability and city marketing, which consequently resulted in “museum touristification” (Alcaraz, Hume, & Sullivan Mort, 2009; Ooi, 2005). The non-profit mandate of custodianship of ancient artifacts has hence shifted to a more marketable method (Alcaraz et al., 2009), and research attention to museum consumption has risen from its traditional perspective of museum as a place of production (Johanson & Olsen, 2010).

The resultant spike in museum attendance is physically challenging museums' reception capacities, and has further impacted museum operations, including outcomes of long queues, noise, and overcrowding, which have jeopardized museums' traditional reverential atmosphere and caused interference and frustration among tourists on vacation as well as habitual museum goers. A few distinctive policies have hence been developed to manage crowds. For example, the Louvre announced that it had doubled the number of entrance doors to improve the flow of people and reduce the noise of visitors streaming through, while the British Museum was considering widening its front doors to alleviate entrance queues (Khaleeli, 2015). On the other hand, the Palace Museum in Beijing has limited its daily number of visitors by requiring visitors to register and reserve tickets with a real name online prior to their visit (CRI, 2015).

Regardless of their policy of openness or austerity measures, over the past decades, besides counting visitors, museums have been attempting to better describe and understand who their visitors are. With the notion of maintaining the benefits of increased visitor numbers without negatively impacting museums' core values, this research was designed to study the tourists in museums, their behavior, experiences, and expectations by investigating their on-line sharing of negative museum experiences. Visitors would rather silently switch service providers than file complaints; however, their dissatisfaction is valuable for measuring and identifying inadequate museum services and creating opportunities for improvement (Tax & Brown, 1998).

Following the advent of social media, tourists began to evaluate their museum experiences on web-based platforms, and these platforms are now heavily exploited by travelers for trip inspiration and planning. Thus, this study has conducted a content analysis of negative comments on TripAdvisor, the largest travel review website, to investigate tourists' complaints as evidence of the service failures of museums that are

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.06.020
Received 12 August 2017; Received in revised form 15 June 2018; Accepted 18 June 2018
0261-5177/ © 2018 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

under pressure from oversubscribed museum tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural tourism in museums

The incidence of cultural tourism, which is defined by ATLAS (2009) as "the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs" has been rose in the global tourism market. The U.K. Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has revealed that the museums and galleries that are directly funded by the U.K. government attracted 50.7 million visitors in 2014/2015, a record high since the first data were published in 2002/03 (DCMS, 2015); although there was a decline of 2.6 percent in 2015/2016 (DCMS, 2016). Museums have been immensely affected by this phenomenon of increased tourists, and among these effects, the quality of the visiting experience has been jeopardized. The large number of tourists results in queuing, noise, occasional shoving, and sometimes an inability to view the exhibits (Maddison & Foster, 2003). Therefore, a number of museums have used control management to deal with this visitors' boom, particularly during peak tourism season. For example, the Palace of Versailles has posted an unusual request on its website, advising tourists to postpone their visit; the Uffizi Gallery has begun selling tickets for specific time slots, while the Louvre has consulted crowd-control experts to improve its museum flows (Gamerman, Landauro, & Molone, 2015).

de Rojas and Camarero (2008) indicated that the level of visitors' satisfaction, derived primarily from their assessment of their experiences, determines the contribution of cultural tourism. Therefore, probably one of the most severe challenges facing museums in the 21st century is how to brace for tourists, while simultaneously enhancing both their experience and satisfaction.

2.2. Museum experience

One manifestation of the museum world nowadays has been the shift in focus from collection/product to audience/service. This shift has been emphasized by Cunnell and Prentice (2000) with the identification of visitor experience as core product of a museum. Pantalony (2013) elaborates on this by reshaping the functions of modern museums as preservation, providing access to collections, educating the public, entertaining and interacting in storytelling, and providing the public with an experience. Indeed, the function of museums as environments for experiences has been noted as a revolution in museology (Roppola, 2012).

Museum experiences comprise the subjective mental state felt by participants during a service encounter (Otto & Ritchie, 1996), which "may include feelings of fun and enjoyment, escape from routine, sharing valued time with family or friends or learnings" (McIntosh, 1999). Packer (2008) reiterated that it is the experience, not outcome of learning that matters to museums, and payed special attention to restoration outcomes for museum experience. These experiences are majorly affected by but not limited to the settings of a museum, from its entrance/lobby, exhibitions, amenity areas (rest rooms, gift shop, and food service), to the macro-architecture of the museum. Objects and interpretive materials (labels, media, and brochures) are also part of the physical context (Bitgood, 2002; Falk & Dierking, 2013; Kirchberg & Tröndle, 2012). An atmospherics model has been proposed for a more holistic view of the visitor-environment dynamic in the museum context (Forrest, 2013).

Museum experiences are also both cognitive and affective; that is, they correlate with visitors' personal and sociocultural contexts, which are inextricably intertwined, and associated with the time before, during, and after the museum visit (Falk & Dierking, 2013; Kirchberg & Tröndle, 2012). Based on data from the Smithsonian museums, Doering (1999) asserted that the four distinct experience types—objective, cognitive, introspective, and social—reinforced the social image and positioning of a museum.

As a result, different kinds of museums incline to different experience preferences, different visitor agendas, and different entrance narratives. For example, art museums are designated as object experiences, while science museums tend to emphasize cognitive experience. Museum professionals—administrators, educators, designers, and curators—are no longer adopting the absolute role of harnessing visitors' expectations about their experience; instead, it has been necessary to redefine the relationship between a museum and its visitor in terms of an accountability to the client approach.

Bitgood's visitor research focuses on three general audience types—leisure (unscheduled visitors), school groups, and visitors (Bitgood, 2002), while Falk and Dierking categorized museum visitors into five functional types: explorers, facilitators, professionals/hobbyists, experience seekers, and rechargers (Falk & Dierking, 2013). Museum visitors are diverse in interest, with distinctive agendas, and are thus complex entities. Their life experiences and knowledge differentiate and affect how they interact with and experience a museum (Forrest, 2013).

How, then, can museums competently provide a setting that supports and enhances the museum experience and removes barriers or constraints that interfere with or detract from that experience? Or, even more progressively, from a constructivist's lens, can museums engage the visitor as a co-builder of museum experience (Aubert-Gamet, 1997)? In this context, service quality comprises the degree and direction of discrepancy between perceptions and expectations (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) and is widely used by both researchers and practitioners to assess tourists' experiences of a museum.

2.3. Service quality and failure

Harrison and Shaw (2004) indicated that decreasing resources coupled with increasing competition have made it necessary for museums to improve service quality to enhance visitor satisfaction. However, service quality is difficult to conceptualize or evaluate because service includes three main characteristics: intangibles, heterogeneity, and inseparability (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Nevertheless, service quality in the tourism sector has become one of the main managerial fields, bringing benefits such as increased numbers of tourists, purchase of souvenir products, visitor loyalty, attraction of new visitors, positive word-of-mouth, and employee satisfaction and commitment (Babakus, Bienstock, & Scotter, 2004; Frochot & Hughes, 2000; O'Neill, 2000; Ramsaran-Fowdar, 2007). In this vein, in an attempt to make visits more enjoyable, museums have increasingly placed emphasis on evaluations of visitor satisfaction and service quality to understand visitors' expectation of museums and their overall experience.

The SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) is widely used and comprises a generic instrument for measuring different issues of service quality, represented by five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsibility, assurance, and empathy. Frochot and Hughes (2000) subsequently re-modified the SERVQUAL model into a new model called HISTOQUAL, which proposed five dimensions: responsiveness, tangibles, communication, consumables, and empathy.

Responsiveness refers to staff efficiency and the ability to recognize customer needs; tangibles refer to the property environment (interior and exterior), such as cleanliness, authenticity, and attractiveness; communication refers to the quality and detail of the information provided; consumables refer to additional services such as restaurants and shops; empathy refers to the willingness to take into consideration the needs of children and less able visitors.

To judge the service quality of a museum, visitors' service satisfaction is a tactic which has been frequently exploited; however, visitor's dissatisfaction caused by museum service failure seems to be neglected

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