



## Research Paper

## Does satisfaction with package tours lead to successful vacation experiences?

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## ABSTRACT

Tour operators play a key role in the creation of destination experiences by assembling and distributing package tourism products. This study examines how satisfaction with the components of a package tour affects the success of a vacation experience by analyzing customer satisfaction data ( $n=38,153$ ) from the largest tour operator in Finland. A principal component analysis identified six dimensions of a package tour, of which a regression model indicated that tour operator's destination services and accommodation services were the key factors in explaining the success of the vacation experience. Pre-tour services and environmental issues were also essential, whereas flight and airport services were the least important. However, these six components explained only 34% of the variance in the success of an experience. Therefore, it is argued that satisfaction with tour operators' services has only a limited impact on the success of a package tourism experience. This strengthens the idea that hybrid and complex tourism experiences are influenced by various factors and actors, many of which are irrespective of the tour operator.

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## 1. Introduction

The tourism industry exists in order to offer tourists extraordinary, satisfactory, valuable, and memorable experiences (e.g. Pizam, 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011). Nevertheless, as experiences are subjective and internal in nature, they cannot be produced by the tourism industry. Tourism organizations can create favorable prerequisites, circumstances, and environments for experience formation, but the outcome still depends on how a tourist reacts to the interaction with the event, and may differ tremendously from what was intended by the service provider (Komppula, 2005; Komppula, 2006; Mossberg, 2007).

Similar to experience, value is also an elusive concept (Carù & Cova, 2003) determined by the customer (e.g. Grönroos, 2000; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Thus, measuring a vacation experience is challenging (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Jennings, 2010; Neal & Gursoy, 2008; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). Generally, satisfaction is considered as an outcome of an experience, even though tourists do not travel to achieve satisfaction, but to gain experiences that fulfill their needs and wants (Quinlan Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). Despite the increasing research interest in tourism experiences (e.g. Morgan, Lugosi, & Ritchie, 2010), it is still somewhat unclear which components constitute a tourism experience per se and

how to define the roles of, for example, eating, sleeping, and transportation, which are necessary for the journey (Quan & Wang, 2004).

On a general level, tourism experiences are influenced by elements both outside of and within an individual (Quinlan Cutler & Carmichael, 2010), and by factors related to the travelers, local populations, and the products (Nickerson, 2006). Focusing more closely on the service environment or "the experiencescape", tourism experiences are affected by the physical environment, personnel, other tourists, products/souvenirs, and the theme/story (Mossberg, 2007).

There is, however, a need for closer investigation into how, and to what extent, these different factors influence the success of a tourism experience. For instance, Quinlan Cutler and Carmichael (2010, p. 22) noted that tourism experiences need further investigation, particularly into: how experiences are influenced by (i) physical and social settings, and (ii) product/service attributes; (iii) whether satisfaction is an appropriate measurement of experience; and (iv) what the importance of internal and external factors is, in influencing quality tourism experiences. Furthermore, (Walls et al., 2011, p. 20) stated that research is needed to verify or falsify the general assumption that experience factors carry equal weight in experience formation, and to determine whether a weighting system could be used to measure the importance of the different factors involved in experience formation.

This study responds to these research gaps by focusing on the role of the tour operator in the creation of package tourism experiences. The purpose is to examine how satisfaction with

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the different elements of a package tour affects the success of a vacation experience. The study contributes to academic research by enhancing understanding on package tourism experiences, and provides managerial implications to facilitate experience creation efforts within tourism destinations and tour operator businesses.

The literature review begins by characterizing the package tourism market and summarizing previous research on package tours. Tourism products and their influence on tourism experiences are then discussed, and attention is drawn to the evaluation of these package tourism experiences. In the methodology section, the research design, data, and analyses are described, after which, the results of the study follow. In the last section, the conclusions and contribution of the study are presented and discussed in relation to previous and future studies. Finally, managerial implications are suggested.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Package tourism

This study approaches destination experiences through package tourism, which is a predominant form of outbound leisure tourism in Europe (Bastakis, Buhalis, & Butler, 2004; Buhalis & Laws, 2001). However, during the past years European tour operators have had to respond to the presumed crisis in traditional package travel by creating more individualized, diversified, and flexible packages (Bastakis et al., 2004; Bramwell, 2004; Buhalis & Laws, 2001; Casarin, 2001; Shaw & Williams, 2004). In Asia, by contrast, an increasing tourism demand has accelerated the rapid growth of the package tourism market (Chen & Hsu, 2012; Wong & Lee, 2012). Consequently, research on package tourism and tour operators seems to be currently dominated by Asian viewpoints (e.g. Chang, 2009; Heung, 2008; Huang, Hsu, & Chan, 2010; Jin, He, & Song, 2012; Wang, Hsieh, Chou, & Lin, 2007; Wang, Jao, Chan, & Chung, 2010; Wong & Lee, 2012; Wong & Wang, 2009) over Western viewpoints (e.g. Alegre, Cladera, & Sard, 2012; Campo & Yagüe, 2008; Davies & Downward, 2007; Koutoulas, Tsartas, Papatheodorou, & Proutzou, 2009; Rewtrakunphaiboon & Oppewal, 2008; Rosselló & Riera, 2012; Trunfio, Petruzzellis, & Nigro, 2006).

Furthermore, in the Asian context the term “group package tour” (Wang, Hsieh, & Huan, 2000; Wang et al., 2007) is used to highlight the intense interaction between a group of tourists and their tour leader (Lee, Wilkins, & Lee, 2011). In contrast, a characteristic of the European “package tours” (Hanefors & Mossberg Larsson, 1999) or “charter tours” (Mossberg Larsson, 1995) is that tourists are left to enjoy their vacation quite independently as tour leaders are present only occasionally (e.g. during transfers and excursions). However, terms like “guided package tour” (Bowie & Chang, 2005) or “inclusive tour” (Bowen, 2001) are used in the European context to describe roundtrip-type package tours.

Adopting the European perspective, a package tour is here understood as a pre-arranged combination of accommodation, transportation, and/or other significant tourist services (Council Directive 90/314/EEC, 1990). In Europe, the package tourism market is highly concentrated, and the Northern-European tour operators in particular have developed into massive organizations (see Budeanu, 2005) by integrating transportation services and travel retailing into their core tour-operating business (Bastakis et al., 2004). In recent years this integration has also reached tourism destination areas where tour operators have become key players by acquiring accommodation establishments and incoming tour and coach operators (Bastakis et al., 2004). At an individual business level, the tour operators’ market power causes problems

and conflicts, such as low prices and profit margins. However, destinations as entities are considered to benefit from tour operators, for example through the increased accessibility offered by charter flights, support for marketing and promoting the destination area, and expansion of the tourism season. In addition, tour operators often monitor the performance of the entire tourism industry, and raise issues with destination management organizations towards the improvement of the quality of destination experiences (Bastakis et al., 2004; Trunfio et al., 2006).

In Scandinavia, the competition in the package tourism market has long been fierce, and different tour operators’ customers may even end up travelling on the same flight and staying in the same hotel (Mossberg Larsson, 1995; Roper, 2005). In Finland, package tourism is a common way of distributing outbound tourism (1.6 million package tours in 2010), even though the market share has decreased from 55% at the beginning of the century to 41% (Statistics Finland, 2010). Despite the stereotyped conception of the package tourist as a lower middle-class individual (Smith, 1977), a package tour is chosen for a variety of reasons (see Bastakis et al., 2004; Enoch, 1996; Laws, 1997; Sheldon & Mak, 1987; Wickens, 2002) and Finnish package tourists in fact come from all social classes (Selänniemi, 1996).

Notably, due to the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) the role of the travel agents and tour operators alike has changed considerably from providing advisory functions and transaction processing to the provision of consultative services (Cheynel, Downes, & Legg, 2006). In the current trend of “do-it-yourself” travel arrangements, the opportunities of tour-operating business seem to lie in concentration on certain markets and tailor-made services instead of providing mere scale economies.

### 2.2. Experiencing tourism products

In experiential consumption and marketing, the interaction between customers and companies is central (e.g. Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999, 2003). According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) in the “second generation” experience economy value is based on the co-creation experiences. Carù and Cova (2007), in turn, outlined a continuum based on the role of customers and companies in creating experiences. Finnish package tours are likely to fall into the middle of this continuum, as tour operators provide an experiential platform by assembling the packages (e.g. Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007), but eventually customers construct their own experiences by choosing which services they wish to use. Notably, the more service encounters the tourists have, the more possibilities there are for tour operators to influence their experiences (Hanefors & Mossberg Larsson, 1999; Mossberg Larsson, 1995).

Tourism experiences<sup>1</sup> take place in phases (Neal & Gursoy, 2008; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). This is acknowledged also in Quinlan Cutler and Carmichael’s (2010) profound conceptual model of influences and outcomes of a tourism experience (Fig. 1) which thus forms a solid basis for analyzing package tourism experiences.

The influential realm refers to the external elements that have an impact on the tourism experience (Quinlan Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). Physical aspects are related to physical settings, spatial characteristics, and geographical features, which are all important in understanding tourism experiences (e.g. Mossberg, 2007; Ryan, 2002). Social aspects include various social influences such as social settings, personal relationships, and interactions

<sup>1</sup> For consistency, the term “tourism experience” (e.g., Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Nickerson, 2006) is used here, even though “tourist experience” also often appears in the literature (e.g., Komppula, 2006; Mossberg, 2007; Quinlan Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Quan & Wang, 2004; Ryan, 2002).

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