



## The influence of competition on visitor satisfaction and loyalty

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### H I G H L I G H T S

- Visitor satisfaction and loyalty should be measured relative to competitors.
- New improved constructs of satisfaction and loyalty incorporating competitors.
- Lower skewness and higher variability in visitor responses.
- Benchmarked and more interpretable management performance measures.

### A R T I C L E I N F O

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### A B S T R A C T

Using visitor survey results from a metropolitan zoo, this paper shows how measuring satisfaction and loyalty relative to competitors results in different and more easily interpretable measures to those currently considered in the literature. These new measures possess distributions with reduced skewness and increased variability, reducing a problem that has plagued visitor studies. Furthermore, loyalty can be predicted more successfully by attribute performance when both are measured relative to competitors, providing stronger convergent validity for loyalty when this is measured relative to competitors explicitly. Benchmarking satisfaction and loyalty to competitors provides improved tools for management and new avenues for tourism and consumer research.

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## 1. Introduction

The measurement of satisfaction and loyalty behaviours such as the intentions to repurchase or recommend to others has a long history in marketing, management and tourism. Satisfied visitors are seen by tourism management as a measurable performance outcome. More significantly, however, satisfaction is viewed as antecedent to loyalty since dissatisfied visitors are unlikely to exhibit the loyalty behaviours crucial to the future survival of the tourist destination.

Past research concentrates on philosophical theorisations on how visitor satisfaction is formulated and which constructs can be used to predict satisfaction and loyalty. For example, the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Oh & Parks, 1997; Rust & Oliver, 1994; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001) proposes that satisfaction arises when actual performance exceeds expected performance. Under this theory, expectations define a benchmark within the psyche of visitors and satisfaction arises when performance exceeds

this benchmark. This implies visitors with higher expectations are harder to satisfy. This, however, is just one view of satisfaction: a broad topic with many definitions, conceptualizations, components and possible determinants covered in a rich and diverse literature. Furthermore, as an anonymous reviewer indicated, the literature uses different definitions and measurements of expectations, covering aspect such as future performance, desires, goals and norms based on past experience (Fuchs & Weiermair, 2004). For a more thorough treatment of satisfaction and expectations than is possible here the reader is directed to the comprehensive treatment in Oliver (2010).

A considerable variety of constructs that predict satisfaction and loyalty have been investigated in the literature, including different types of service quality, motivations, and expectations, (see, for example, Brady et al., 2005; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Cronin, Brady, Tomas, & Hult, 2000; Graefe & Fedler, 1986; Nowacki, 2008; Taplin, 2012a; Tian-Cole & Crompton, 2003; Tian-Cole, Crompton, & Willson, 2002; Sanchez, Callarisa, Rodriguez, & Moliner, 2006; Yuan & Jang, 2008; Zabkar, Brencic, & Dmitrovic, 2010). Indeed, a major focus of research has been proposing new constructs that influence satisfaction or loyalty and demonstrating this relationship with empirical evidence

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for a variety of tourism settings. That is, the same or very similar dependent variables relating to satisfaction and loyalty have been used with research effort primarily exerted investigating new independent variables. These new constructs used to explain variation in satisfaction and loyalty may be motivated by philosophical theories regarding the formation of satisfaction or by knowledge of the types of attributes important to visitors.

A gap in the literature exists pertaining to the influence of competition on satisfaction and loyalty in tourism (see Olsen, 2002 for an example of marketing fish). It might be argued that this is appropriate for satisfaction as visitors can be satisfied with all tourist destinations or venues. Alternatively, it could be argued that satisfaction is a concept relative to alternatives. For example, within the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm it is plausible that expected performance is at partially determined by the performance of competing destinations previously experienced by the visitor. The extent to which this expectancy benchmark in visitors results from the experience of visitors at competing venues has remained unexplored in the literature. In particular, while some research has used levels of agreement with statements such as “overall, I was satisfied with my visit today” or “satisfaction exceeded expectations”, the measurement of satisfaction has not explicitly considered the influence of competitors.

For loyalty, the argument to consider competitors is even more compelling. While visitors may be satisfied with their visits to numerous venues (possible hundreds or all previously visited venues) they cannot revisit all these venues (at least not at the same time) and it is unlikely they will recommend many venues. Time does not permit it. For example, when people decide what they will do for their next recreational or tourism experience they can not decide to do everything but rather decide on the best alternative from those available. Venues compete for their patronage and so the relevant question is not “will I visit this place again” but “will I visit this place rather than any of the other competing places”.

Similarly, recommendations to others are made in comparison to competing alternatives. While in theory visitors may wish to recommend every venue they have visited, in practice they will only recommend a few “favourites”. When asked about one venue they may respond that they would “highly recommend it” however in practice they would never initiate such a recommendation because there are other competing venues that they would recommend even more highly.

### 1.1. Satisfaction and loyalty

The appropriate meaning of satisfaction remains controversial as the term is used to represent different concepts within different paradigms. Originally viewed as a cognitive result of external information obtained from a tourist experience, more recently satisfaction has been recognised as an emotional response to experiences (del Bosque et al., 2008). Satisfaction is often viewed as an appropriate outcome because satisfied visitors are an objective of tourism managers. Tongue and Moore (2007) suggested Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) should be reconceptualised as Importance-Satisfaction Analysis (ISA) as satisfaction more accurately captures the response of visitors. Previously, IPA (Martilla & James, 1977) compared average attribute performance (not described as satisfaction) to average attribute importance to create four quadrants based on whether performance and importance are each high or low. Appropriate management action is suggested by the quadrant an attribute lies in (for example, an attribute with high performance and low importance might suggest “concentrate management here”). Tongue and Moore (2007) argue performance implies an evaluation of managers however in tourism services it is recognised that attributes beyond the control

of management play an important role (attributes under the control of management are often referred to as service quality attributes). In this paper the term performance is retained for individual attributes and satisfaction for an overall assessment only to minimise confusion. Although IPA has proved popular with managers it is not without criticisms (Oh, 2001), including the fact that importance may be influenced by performance. For example, basic attributes such as safety and clean toilets are likely to be considered of low importance if their performance is high but very important when performance is low. This brings into question the measurement validity of importance and hence caution is warranted when interpreting IPA. For example, allowing performance on an attribute in a “potential overkill” quadrant to reduce may also increase importance and places the attribute in the “concentrate management here” quadrant.

A popular conceptualization of satisfaction uses visitor expectations as a benchmark: positive disconfirmation arises when visitor experiences exceed expectations and negative disconfirmation when these experiences fall short of expectations. Positive disconfirmation is claimed to lead to satisfaction while negative disconfirmation leads to dissatisfaction. This disconfirmation theory, however, has largely been applied to gaps between experiences and expectations at an attribute level rather than a global level. That is, research has emphasised the extent to which experience-expectation gaps on specific attributes predict overall satisfaction (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Brady, Cronin, & Brand, 2002; Crompton & Love, 1995; Hudson, Hudson, & Miller, 2004; Whipple & Thach, 1988). For example, Crompton and Love (1995) provided detailed descriptions of how they measured attribute performance, importance and expectations in their questionnaire of visitors to a festival, including how theory suggests these should be combined to predict overall satisfaction (such as performance-expectation), however for measurement of overall satisfaction provide only: “In order to obtain a direct overall measure of quality, respondents also were asked to rate overall quality of the festival on a seven-point scale” (Crompton & Love, 1995, p18).

Overall satisfaction is typically measured with Likert scale measures of agreement with statements that visitors were ‘satisfied’ or ‘pleased’ with their visit. Theory is used to suggest that visitors arise at this overall satisfaction by making implicit comparisons with their expectations, without explicitly being asked to do so. This appears inconsistent with the assumption that they do not make this comparison implicitly for individual attributes and may explain the inability of performance minus expectation gaps calculated explicitly from separate questions regarding performance and expectations on attributes to predict overall satisfaction.

Overall satisfaction can also be measured with explicit reference to expectations, such as levels of agreement that the visit “exceeded expectations” (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Brady et al., 2002; Zabkar et al., 2010) however the effect of this explicit comparison to expectations is largely ignored. For example, Zabkar et al. (2010) combine three measures in their construct of overall satisfaction however only one of the three explicitly refers to expectations. They are content with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.73 for their visitor satisfaction construct despite the fact that the indicator reliability for the “exceed expectations” question is only 0.38 compared to 0.75 for the “pleased” and “delighted” questions (Zabkar et al., 2010, p. 542). Calculations from the covariance matrix (Zabkar et al., 2010, p. 544) reveal a correlation between the “pleased” and “delighted” satisfaction questions of 0.996 while correlations between these questions and the “exceeded expectations” question are only 0.605 and 0.654 respectively. This suggests overall satisfaction may be a different construct when explicitly measured relative to expectations.

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