



Modelling perceived quality, visitor satisfaction and behavioural intentions at the destination level

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ABSTRACT

Visitor perceptions of the quality of a tourist destination, satisfaction with their experience and the resulting behavioural intentions are vital for successful destination management and marketing. The purpose of our research is to explore the complex relationships between these constructs using structural equation modelling, whereby both formative and reflective constructs are included. The structural model was tested on a sample of 1056 visitors at four tourist destinations in Slovenia. The empirical validation of the conceptual model supports the research hypotheses. Destination attributes affect the perceived quality of tourist offerings, which positively relates to satisfaction as well as visitors' behavioural intentions. The link between satisfaction and behavioural intentions was also confirmed. These research findings contribute to a better understanding of which behavioural mechanisms and factors represent a viable basis for increasing customer retention at the level of individual providers as well as a destination as a whole.

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1. Introduction

The relationships between service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty are a much debated issue in business research. Several models have been proposed and empirically tested in a wide range of industries, including tourism. It is generally believed that in tourism, high service quality and resulting satisfaction lead to positive word-of-mouth endorsements, referrals, and repeat visits, which ultimately affect the financial performance of suppliers associated with the tourism industry. Most tourism product providers as well as destination management organisations perform regular visitor satisfaction surveys. However, the key issue is: how are the survey results used in policy design and implementation? Mazanec, Woeber, and Zins (2007) found that while destination competitiveness (DC) is usually interpreted as the destination's ability to provide the visitors with "a satisfying, memorable experience" and thereby increase the number of visitors and the destination's revenue, the concept remains on a definitional level. They suggest that that DC indices and measures are of

little use unless they "... acquire a role as a theoretical construct in a system of cause–effect relationships" (p. 88).

The purpose of our research is to explore the relationship between destination quality and visitor satisfaction and, on this basis, to predict visitors' behavioural intentions. Previous studies in tourism have produced somewhat controversial results. While Cole and Illum (2006) and Chen and Tsai (2007) found that satisfaction fully mediates the impact of attribute-level service quality on behavioural intentions, Baker and Crompton (2000) and Chi and Qu (2008) established a partial mediation effect. In addition, Lee, Petrick, and Crompton (2007) found no mediation effect at all. An overview of the literature shows that, as a theoretical construct, customer satisfaction is problematic to define and operationalise, especially in relation to perceived service quality (Cole & Illum, 2006; Lee, Lee, & Yoo, 2000). Hence, our first research objective is to delineate the constructs of perceived quality and satisfaction at the level of a tourist destination, and evaluate their impact on visitors' post-experience behaviour. The difficulty in clearly separating the constructs of customer satisfaction and service quality stems from the high correlation between the two constructs typically observed in empirical studies across various industries. Studies focusing on tourist destination management issues are particularly susceptible to this problem as satisfaction is often evaluated through the characteristics of the tourist offerings, which also serves to assess the quality of a destination.

Our second objective relates to measurement issues. Measurement practices in business research are conventionally based on

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reflective measurement. Moreover, practically all established scales in the literature apply the classical test theory, wherein the direction of causality runs from the latent variable (i.e., construct) to its measures (i.e., indicators) (Diamantopoulos, 2008). In recent years, researchers have recognised that for some constructs it makes more sense to reverse the causality, implying that a construct is a combination of its measures and hence changes in the indicators cause changes in the construct rather than vice versa (Jarvis, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2003). Perceived quality measured at the level of a tourist destination may qualify as one of these constructs. Therefore, we adopt a novel methodological approach in tourism research by conceptualising the perceived quality of the tourist offerings at the destination level as a formative construct, and incorporate it in a structural model together with two reflective constructs – visitor satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Including formative indicators in the model increases its diagnostic usefulness (Ruiz, Gremler, Washburn, & Carrión, 2008) by enabling destination managers to determine which destination attributes are the most influential in forming visitors' quality perceptions and thereby affecting their behavioural intentions regarding the destination.

The contributions of this study are therefore threefold: 1) it reconceptualises and evaluates the relationships between perceived quality, visitor satisfaction and behavioural intentions at the level of a tourist destination; 2) it contributes to the existing literature by testing a structural model that includes formative and reflective constructs; and 3) it opens a pathway for managers to develop measurement instruments with a higher diagnostic and applied value.

The article is structured as follows: first we review the marketing and tourism literature on perceived quality, satisfaction and behavioural intentions and develop a conceptual model. Next, we present the results of testing the model using SEM analysis, discuss the findings and outline some theoretical and managerial implications of our analysis. Finally, we discuss the limitations of our study and offer suggestions for future research.

2. The conceptual background

A tourist destination can be defined as an amalgam of tourism products and services consumed under the same brand name offering consumers an integrated experience, which is subjectively interpreted according to the consumers' travel itinerary, cultural background, purpose of visit, past experience etc. (Buhalis, 2000; Fuchs & Weiermair, 2003). One of the key elements of successful destination marketing is tourist satisfaction, which influences the choice of destination and the decision to return (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). However, Omerzel Gomezelj and Mihalič (2008) note that several destination competitiveness models include elements that are the building blocks of tourist satisfaction but fail to incorporate them in a coherent and unified manner in a model that can be used as a general instrument and tool for benchmarking.

Based on a literature review in the fields of service quality, consumer behaviour and tourism, we identify the determinants of a visitor's behavioural intentions and propose hypotheses regarding the causal relationships between the constructs.

2.1. Measuring perceived quality at the destination level

Quality in tourism is created by the processes of service delivery (e.g., friendliness, courtesy, efficiency, reliability, staff competence) and outcomes of services (e.g., accommodation, food, leisure facilities). Gronroos (1984) suggests that services have two quality dimensions: technical quality, which refers to the outcomes (what the customer gets), and functional quality, which refers to the

processes (how he/she gets it). In this framework, the perceived service is “the result of a consumer's view of a bundle of service dimensions, some of which are technical and some of which are functional in nature” (p. 39), whereby functional quality cannot be evaluated as objectively as technical quality.

The importance of quality in service industries as perceived by customers has spurred extensive research in this field. Probably the instrument most widely used for evaluating service quality is SERVQUAL, which was developed in the mid-1980s (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). In the past two decades, SERVQUAL has been applied to numerous service industries, including tourism (e.g., Armstrong, Mok, Go, & Chan, 1997; Atilgan, Akinci, & Aksoy, 2003; Hsieh, Lin, & Lin, 2008; Hui, Wan, & Ho, 2007). However, when the purpose of research is to evaluate visitor experiences at a tourist destination rather than assessing the service quality offered by a specific service provider (e.g., hotel, restaurant, tour operator etc.), the use of SERVQUAL has some drawbacks (Tribe & Snaith, 1998). SERVQUAL is based on evaluations of five service dimensions (reliability, assurance, empathy, responsiveness, and tangible assets) and when relying solely on this instrument for quality assessment, some important factors of service encounters at the destination level (e.g., attractions, entertainment, cultural experiences etc.) may be left out from the evaluation process. Hence, most tourism studies use service product attributes as a platform for assessing the quality of tourism products. For example, Baker and Crompton (2000) measured quality at a festival setting with four dimensions: generic festival features, specific entertainment features, information sources and comfort amenities. S. Y. Lee et al. (2007) found that service quality operationalised as a set of attributes better predicts visitors' behavioural intentions than an alternative model which defines quality as overall excellence or superiority.

At the destination level, a tourism product is a bundle of components such as accommodation, travel, food, entertainment, etc. To analyse the elements of tourism supply, Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, and Wanhill (1993) grouped destination attributes into the “four A's” framework (Attractions, Access, Amenities and Ancillary services), which was latter further developed by Buhalis (2000) to the “six A's” (Attractions, Accessibility, Amenities, Available packages, Activities and Ancillary services). Chen and Tsai (2007) used the items covering the aspects of the “six As” framework to operationalise trip quality. Cole and Illum (2006) used similar attributes to evaluate the “performance quality” of a festival. Hui et al. (2007) examined which destination attributes create overall satisfaction/dissatisfaction and found that these vary across groups of tourists from different geographical regions. They also found that the set of significant predictors depended upon whether the “disconfirmation” or “perceptions only” measurement was employed.

Previous research indicates that the relevant destination attributes are highly contextual and that the measurement of quality should reflect the specificity of a destination's features. Dabholkar, Shepherd, and Thorpe (2000) propose conceiving the factors relevant to service quality as antecedents of overall service quality rather than its components since “the antecedents model provides a more complete understanding of service quality and how these evaluations are formed” (p. 166). We extend their line of reasoning and conceptualise the quality of a tourist destination's offerings as a formative rather than a reflective construct. Reflective measurement is based on the premise that measured variables are manifestations of the latent construct. Conversely, with formative measurement, a construct is a combination of its measures and each change in the indicators causes a change in the construct.

Jarvis et al. (2003) suggest observing four sets of criteria to determine the appropriate (formative vs. reflective) measurement model: the direction of causality between the construct and its

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