

Conceptualization of a meaning-based research approach for tourism service experiences

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explain the meaning-based research approach to improve quality of tourism services. The article includes a discussion on tourism quality, information-processing approach (IPA), meaning-based approach (MBA) as an alternative to the IPA, and a case study to illustrate the MBA and strategies to improve service quality design. The MBA is based on an alternative set of assumptions about the tourist that enables managers and researchers to gather in-depth customers' perceptions of the service environment and improve service quality design. According to the evidence gathered in the case study, the three narrative themes for the backpackers were social interaction with other backpackers including differences between solitary and travel partners, independence, and the symbols of a distinctive backpacker's accommodation. Various management strategies are suggested based on the three themes. Three limitations are noted for the MBA to improve service quality for tourism service experiences.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explain the meaning-based research approach to improve quality of tourism services. The article includes a discussion on tourism quality, information-processing approach (IPA), a description of the meaning-based approach (MBA) as an alternative to the IPA, and a case study to illustrate the MBA and strategies to improve service quality design. The MBA is a “model of human behavior that portrays individuals as actively engaged in the construction of meaning” (Patterson & Williams, 2002, p. 103). This approach is closely aligned with constructivist ontology and enables managers and researchers to

gather in-depth customers' perceptions of the service environment for improving service quality design.

2. Service quality in tourism

Quality management in tourism strives for the improvement of the service to deliver a distinctive service (Williams & Buswell, 2003) and stay competitive (Greengarten-Jackson, 1996). Tourism service managers are challenged by a complex service environment that has been characterized as (a) holistic process (Lovell, 1984), (b) interconnection of tourism organizations (Otto & Brent Ritchie, 1996; Reisinger, 2001; Woods & Deegan, 2003), (c) performance (Grove, Fisk, & Bitner, 1992), (d) experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), and (e) social encounter (Swan & Bowers, 1998). Within

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this holistic service experience, tourism managers aim to deliver a quality service and develop strategies to improve the service performance from the tourists' point of view (Gustafsson & Johnson, 2003).

The utilization of the tourists' viewpoints for appraising service quality has been divided into two user-based schools of thought: the Scandinavian school and the United States school (Williams & Buswell, 2003). The Scandinavian school emphasizes a more holistic idea toward quality based on technical and functional features and customer relationships (Gronroos, 2000). The United States school employs a perspective of tourists as information processors and uses the disconfirmation concept to determine service quality, which is the dominant research approach to improve service quality (Gummesson, 2001).

2.1. Information-processing approach

The IPA assumes tourists are constantly seeking information to make choices concerning the service experience that will satisfy their expectations (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; McCracken, 1987). Tourists as information processors are seen as goal-oriented, aware of their needs and expectations when traveling, consciously aware of the experiences that will determine their satisfaction, and know if the satisfaction and benefits have been obtained from traveling (Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). Therefore, tourists are perceived as rational and analytic in their human behavior by the IPA (Ryan, 1997).

SERVQUAL is a form of disconfirmation model based on the information-processing concept and is a common measurement instrument for obtaining customers' perceptions of quality (Ryan, 1997; Wuest, 2001). SERVQUAL can identify differences or the disconfirmation between the tourists' expectations and their perceived service performance within a range of potential communication gaps for quality improvement of the service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1986). SERVQUAL relates quality uniformly across service settings (Noe, 1999) by measuring five key attribute categories of tangibles, reliability, assurance, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1986). SERVQUAL was suggested as best used to assess service settings closer to its original service environments of appliance repair, retail banking, and long-distance telephone (Robinson, 1999), and the constructs may not be applicable to all tourism sectors (Ekinci & Riley, 1998; Fick & Ritchie, 1991). However, this measurement technique has been used in a variety of tourist settings, such as tour operations (Lam & Zhang, 1999), national park operations (Akama & Kieti 2003), and theme parks (Palmer & O'Neill, 2003), and is widely employed in the accommodation's sector (Ekinci & Riley, 1998).

Based on the tourism service experience, the following are the four limitations of the IPA and SERVQUAL as a disconfirmation model: (a) the assumption that tourists have firm expectations, (b) the focus on the functional attributes of the service, (c) a neglect of the holistic component of tourism service experience, and (d) the restriction of SERVQUAL in improving service quality design. First, SERVQUAL depends on travelers having clear expectations and goals for their behavior. Instead, such expectations and goals are often vague and nonexistent, especially in unfamiliar, unexpected, and unpredictable travel encounters (Arnould & Price, 1993; Laws, 2002). Tourists readily adjust their expectations, experiences, and cognitive dissonance to engage in displacement activities, which would impact the determination of satisfaction through the SERVQUAL approach (Ryan, 1995). The expectations of repeat customers are tenuous because of the constantly changing nature of the tourism service experience (Laws, 2002; Ryan, 1995).

Second, the SERVQUAL as a disconfirmation model concentrates on functional attributes of service and does not reveal to the researcher certain perceptions by the tourist of the service experience. The tourists' perceptions which are neglected by SERVQUAL are the following: (a) the content of the service that was understood by the tourist, (b) the processes creating the gaps between expectations and performance, and (c) the interrelationships of values and belief systems that influence tourist perceptions (Patterson, Williams, & Scherl, 1994). Tourism can be seen as holistic, which refers to the total experience a traveler has with one particular organization's service and the service provided by the interrelationship of various tourism industries. Instead of measuring the total experience with the organization's service, the disconfirmation model measures satisfaction with the performance of specific functions sustained over short time periods, although tourists' encounters with an organization are often for longer periods of time (Ryan, 1997).

Third, the IPA utilizes surveys for data collection that ultimately create a fragmented rather than holistic characterization of the service experience. The tourist's richly contextual narrative voice is difficult to obtain in the concise survey language and its quest for generalizability based on group averages (Terwee, 1990). The acontextual data is employed by researchers to ascertain more generic and abstract knowledge at the expense of rich and contextual knowledge (Patterson et al., 1994; Ryan, 1997).

Fourth, the SERVQUAL approach is limited in providing insights into improving service quality design (Fache, 2000; Schmitt, 2003), which is significant in overall quality of the tourism service experience (Fick & Ritchie, 1991; Gummesson, 1987). SERVQUAL addresses the quality of service delivery on particular

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