

Assessing satisfaction with core and secondary attributes

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Abstract

This research assesses visitor satisfaction with the core and secondary attributes of a tourist destination, using two conventional methods, stated and derived importance. The article shows the importance of core attributes are recoverable equally well, regardless of the method. Importance of secondary attributes, however, vary depending on the estimation method. This difference is systematic. Researchers should use derived methods for assessing satisfaction with secondary attributes. The data are from surveys from visitors to Latin America.
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1. Introduction

A good understanding of customer satisfaction is an essential yet challenging pursuit for researchers and managers alike. Researchers measure satisfaction with the purpose of providing customer feedback to management in order to improve service performance (Danaher and Arweiler, 1996; Pizam, Neumann and Reichel, 1978) and gain competitive advantage (Peters, 1994). Improved customer satisfaction can lead to higher profitability (Anderson et al., 1994; Oh and Parks, 1997), and this has stimulated empirical research on satisfaction in many contexts, including tourist products or destinations (Chon and Olsen, 1991; Danaher and Arweiler, 1996; Kozak, 2001; Pizam et al., 1978).

Customer satisfaction is a cumulative measure of total purchase and consumption experience (Anderson et al., 1994, pp.54). It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon consisting of many different interdependent parts. For example, a tourist product is a composite of elements such as accommodation, entertainment, excursion and food (Pizam et al., 1978), including both core and secondary attributes. Core attributes are the key drivers of customer satisfaction and

correspond to performance factors by Kano (1984). They directly influence overall satisfaction by leading to satisfaction, if performance is high and to dissatisfaction, if performance is low; while the attribute performance — overall satisfaction relation tends to be linear and symmetric. In tourism literature, core attributes correspond to vacation activities/benefits sought by visitors (e.g., sightseeing, beachcombing, sunbathing, etc.). On the other hand, secondary attributes, corresponding to basic factors by Kano (1984), represent expected elements of the destination (e.g., banking, telecom services, drinking water). Conceptually, they are the minimum requirements of services (Brandt, 1987). Secondary attributes are necessary but not sufficient for overall satisfaction. Their influence on overall satisfaction could be indirect and asymmetric. A negative performance by these attributes has a greater impact on overall satisfaction than does positive performance. For instance, dissatisfaction with clean water is likely to have a strong adverse impact on the overall satisfaction, while satisfaction with clean water is unlikely to have much impact.

The core and secondary attributes can further be conceptualized in terms of process/outcome satisfaction. Factors influencing decision process satisfaction might be different from factors influencing outcome or consumption satisfaction. Typically, past research focused on satisfaction with the final outcome (i.e., the purchase decision). However, consumers may also form satisfaction judgments during the decision process (Zhang and Fitzsimons, 1999), which encompasses not only the

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decision making process, but also the purchase experience (Engel and Blackwell, 1982; Fitzsimons et al., 1997). Consumers form process satisfaction based on factors such as availability of product alternatives and pre-purchase information (Westbrook et al., 1978), but form outcome satisfaction by comparing product attributes or performance to their own expectations. In keeping with the conceptualization above, the core attributes will be important for both process satisfaction and outcome satisfaction, but secondary attributes are relevant specifically in relation to process satisfaction.

A good understanding of satisfaction requires assessment of not only the overall level, but also of satisfaction with specific attributes constituting overall satisfaction. This knowledge would permit managers to prioritize attributes and allocate resources in an effective and efficient manner towards enhancing overall satisfaction. Important attributes are emphasized in the short term advertising and long term product development strategy.

Numerous researchers attempt to obtain accurate information on attribute importance and to determine their role in overall satisfaction. Yet, Green and Krieger (1995) find attribute importance far from immutable for various reasons, including composition of the competitive product set or purchase situation, which can influence perceptions of attributes' relative importance and lead to what psychologists call liability (Simonson and Tversky, 1992). Differences in attribute importance may also result from specific techniques used in obtaining them. Typically, researchers employ two techniques for attribute importance, either stated (Kozak, 2001) or derived importance (Haber and Lerner, 1999). Only a few researchers compare these two techniques, and they report divergent results (Chu, 2002; Green and Krieger, 1995). Low convergent validity between stated and derived importance scores are disconcerting for managers who strive to improve performance on the most important attributes. Hence, further research is essentially important for the effective recovery of attribute importance. The current research is a step in that direction.

This paper assesses customer satisfaction with a tourist destination. We assess overall satisfaction; satisfaction with core and secondary attributes; and, most importantly, drivers of overall satisfaction, by using conventional stated and derived importance methods. Specifically, this paper implements: 1) a customer satisfaction index (CSI) by both stated and derived importance methods; 2) obtains CSI based on two independent sets of attributes, core and secondary, respectively, thus providing a systematic assessment of the two methods; and 3) discusses which method to use in assessing importance of core and secondary attributes.

The discrepancy, between attribute importance obtained from stated versus derived methods is more than just measurement error (as claimed by past research), rather it is systematic. The two methods seem to be measuring different underlying constructs; hence, the differences inherently lie in the approaches. Stated importance represents what attributes are critical when tourists make their destination choice, or what benefits tourists are looking for in their vacations. In contrast, derived importance represents the effectiveness of attributes in

driving overall satisfaction. According to Vavra (1997), customers can distinguish between explicit and implicit importance dimensions of product /service attributes; and, core attributes have both high explicit and implicit importance. Hence, importance scores for core attributes (i.e., attributes critical to both process satisfaction and outcome satisfaction) should be recovered equally well by both stated and derived methods. Moreover, the impact of each dimension on the overall CSI should be similar. On the contrary, secondary attributes (i.e., attributes only important for outcome satisfaction) should have high stated importance but low derived importance (Vavra, 1997). Discrepancy is, therefore, to be expected between the importance scores of the secondary attributes obtained by stated versus derived methods. Consequently, the impact of secondary attributes on the overall CSI will differ depending on whether stated or derived approaches are used.

Therefore, for core attributes, either stated or derived importance methods are applicable, but for secondary attributes, derived importance methods are more appropriate. In order to verify this proposition, two sets of satisfaction attributes are considered: 1) core attributes relating to satisfaction with various activities; and, 2) secondary attributes relating to satisfaction with various other decision drivers. Core attributes consist of a wide range of sightseeing, entertainment and sporting activities. Secondary attributes, on the other hand, consist of various aspects such as safety (e.g., clean food and water, crime rate), convenience (e.g., flight and accommodation availability), infrastructure and service (e.g., telecom, banking, transportation), and cost (e.g., local prices). Although satisfaction with core attributes is generally considered as the main determinant of overall satisfaction, secondary attributes, too, influence visitors' overall satisfaction, as well as the choice of vacation destination.

2. Stated importance versus derived importance methods

Conventional methods for assessing attribute importance can be broadly classified as either stated or derived techniques. Stated importance involves explicit assessment of consumer ratings/rankings for each attribute and is favored due to its face validity and straightforward administration and interpretation (Hauser, 1991). However, stated importance technique requires a prior qualitative study to obtain a list of attributes, undermining the purpose of prioritizing attributes. Furthermore, this method produces only a few, if any, statistical differences among attributes. In fact, Hoffman (1960) finds not only the subjective weights are more evenly distributed (than those estimated from derived methods), but also the respondents ascribe too much importance to less important attributes. Finally, the reliability of stated importance methods is questionable since a given individual may have different frames of mind in different contexts (Simonson and Tversky, 1992).

Derived importance refers to the statistical association between attribute ratings (predictors) and overall rating (criterion). The importance of an attribute is statistically determined from this relationship using various techniques including: 1) Pearson correlation; 2) standard regression coefficient or beta weight; 3)

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