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Travel distance and hotel service satisfaction: An inverted U-shaped relationship

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ABSTRACT

The existing literature suggests that travel distance is a crucial factor that determines tourism demand and tourist behavior. However, there are limited attempts to understand how tourists' travel distance shapes their experiences, and more specifically, their satisfaction in a destination. This paper aims to shed light on the distance–satisfaction relationship by analyzing a data set of online hotel reviews at four large US cities in a one-year period. The results show an inverted U-shaped relationship between travel distance and service satisfaction. Inflection points of the quadratic relationship across different cities are also identified. The implications of these findings contribute to literature on tourism geography and allow tourism marketers to develop more effective differential marketing strategies.

1. Introduction

From a geographical perspective, tourism is typically the movement of tourists to a non-routine environment for certain types of experiences, and the travel distance between origin and destination represents the effort that a tourist makes to overcome the geographical obstacles for travel. Therefore, travel distance has long been regarded as a vital parameter in understanding tourism demand and tourist behavior (Nyaupane et al., 2003; Nicolau, 2008; Larsen and Guiver, 2013; Yang et al., 2017). For example, the conventional gravity model from economic geography underscores a distance decay of tourism demand, suggesting that tourist volume to a destination is negatively associated with its distance to the origin. Accordingly, distance-based matrices, such as a market access index and intervening opportunity index, have been heavily used to understand the geographic pattern of tourism demand (Yang and Fik, 2014). Moreover, travel distance tends to influence tourist behavior in the destination, such as their duration of stay (Nicolau et al., 2016) and overall expenditure (Marcussen, 2011). In general, it is economic rationale for a traveler to stay longer and spend more in a distant destination to make the economic and time cost associated with the long haul travel worthwhile.

Despite the abundant literature on understanding the effect of travel distance on tourism demand at both aggregate and individual levels, little is known about how tourists' travel distance shapes their experiences, and more specifically, their satisfaction with accommodations

that are key parts of travel experiences (Stevens, 1992). Some scholars in retailing and marketing have discussed the role of travel distance in evaluating shopping experiences. It has been identified that the consumers, in general, try to reduce the travel distance to the stores because the distance generates a negative impact on utility in forming the overall evaluation to the shopping behaviors (Darley and Lim, 1999; Hsu et al., 2010). However, along with the features of hospitality (i.e., intangibility and perishability) as well as tourism (i.e., novelty seeking motivation) (Jang and Feng, 2007; Wong et al., 1999), the distance–satisfaction relationship does not necessarily show identical patterns with the context of retailing. For instance, people have expectations to involve certain extent of distance that brings about perceptions of travel from their residential places. This would lead to a positive relationship of the travel distance to the satisfaction. Hospitality literature on understanding the distance–satisfaction relationship is largely paucity.

To fill the research gap mentioned above, in this study, we aim to investigate the relationship between tourists' travel distance and their hotel service satisfaction based on a large data set of 36,818 online reviews at four large US cities in a one-year time period. Based on the literature and relevant theories, we propose a non-linear relationship between distance and satisfaction, and this relationship is empirically tested by using a quadratic term of travel distance in multi-level ordered logit models. By doing so, we aim to make several contributions to the current literature. First, we present the theoretical underpinning

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for the quadratic distance–satisfaction relationship. Unlike previous literature positing a monotonic relationship (e.g., [Nyaupane et al., 2003](#); [Walsh et al., 1990](#)), our results tend to better improve the understanding of traveler experience between short, middle, and long-haul tourists. In particular, the inflection point of this quadratic relationship provides interesting implications on destination marketing and operation efforts. Second, we demonstrate the usefulness of leveraging online hotel review data as a geospatial data source to monitor the geography of the market. More specifically, compared to previous survey data, this type of geo-tagged user-generated content (UGC) data is more representative on geographic scope of market because of the large data volume. As a result, this research suggests important implications to fill a gap in the literature regarding tourism geography, and to offer differential marketing strategies for the tourism marketers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online consumer reviews as reflection of service experiences

Understanding consumer experiences is a complex task because it is particularly intricate and thus challenging to generalize about this topic, which is uniquely personal. Along with the competitive environment of the hospitality industry, it is vital for relevant businesses to identify ways to comprehend their consumers' experiences and to enhance satisfaction levels by exceeding expectations. As such, consumer satisfaction has been regarded as one of the prominent elements to measure overall competitiveness in the hospitality industry ([Xiang et al., 2015](#)). Recent scholars in the study of hospitality and tourism have used online consumer review websites to collect the information on consumer satisfaction. Online reviews reflect consumption satisfaction with individual experiences of the services, and in turn they play an important role affecting the decision-making process for other consumers ([Schuckert et al., 2015](#)). Previous studies have demonstrated the associations between the directions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction and the focus of online consumer reviews (i.e., positive or negative) (see [Sun and Qu, 2011](#); [Swanson and Hsu, 2009](#)).

People have a propensity to share their concrete travel experiences on social media websites, from where they are able to plan (or anticipate) their departures, en route experiences and the moments where they are consuming services with like-minded others ([Utz et al., 2012](#)). As such, people use a social media platform as a tool to express their feelings and share their ideas/opinions, which reflects realistic and honest chronicles of visitors' experiences ([Nardi et al., 2004](#)). Thus, online consumer reviews offer richer substance along with presence of online platforms, which allows people to indicate multiple facets of service experiences; for instance, locations, sleep quality, rooms, services, cleanliness ([Park and Nicolau, 2017](#)).

There has been substantial literature on identifying factors that affect service satisfaction in the hotel industry, such as cleanliness, price, facility, location, distance, room quality, food, etc. ([Choi and Chu, 2001](#); [Xiang et al., 2015](#)). Among them, this paper particularly highlights the importance of a situational factor, travel distance. In terms of construal level theory developed in social psychology discussing the relationship between psychological distance (including geographical distance) and the extent to which a type of individuals' thinking of objects or events, geographical distance can determine how people think and make a judgement ([Liberman and Trope, 1998](#)). The detailed discussion of the travel distance in understanding service experiences will be described in the following section.

2.2. Distance and travel behaviors

The distance between two locations is an important attribute influencing the travel decision-making process ([Nyaupane et al., 2003](#); [Nicolau, 2008](#); [Larsen and Guiver, 2013](#)). Indeed, travel distance plays a vital role of inherent spatial dimensions in a tourist's decision making

of destination choice ([Nicolau, 2008](#)).

Reviewing the relevant literature, there seems to have three different arguments of which distance brings about negative, positive, and curvilinear effects on service experiences. In a negative context, the travelers regard the distance as a constraint or restriction ([Nicolau, 2008](#)), which is consistent with the conventional “gravity” model theoretically rooted in economic geography ([Nyaupane et al., 2003](#)). The gravity model, derived from Newton's law of gravity, argues that the interaction between objects is relatively connected to their masses as well as the square of the distance between them in an opposite way ([Timmermans, 2001](#)). Indeed, as distance increases, the place attachment decreases. Other than the geographic perspective, travelers perceive that the distance is a type of opportunity cost encompassing financial (e.g., transportation fares) and nonfinancial (e.g., time and effort) investment ([Lee et al., 2012](#); [Rengert et al., 1999](#)). That is, travelers are required to make a trade-off between their time spent on travel mobility and their time at the destination ([Taylor and Knudson, 1973](#)). In this case, the time it takes to travel to the site is assumed to be an implicit production cost, which refers to disutility of distance ([Rosenthal et al., 1984](#); [Walsh et al., 1990](#)).

From a positive perspective of the travel distance, leisure travelers are, in general, more flexible with their discretionary travel-time activities ([Walsh et al., 1990](#)), as opposed to commuters who have limited controls on choosing a time to travel (e.g., during peak rush-hour traffic). In other words, the time spent on their mobility for leisure trips from their departure, across their route, and arrival at the destination may provide a positive value as part of the travel benefit rather than a cost ([Catton, 1965](#)). This suggests that travelers do not tend to regard their time spent moving to travel destinations as particularly onerous, nor attribute it to a high opportunity cost in their travel time ([Moutinho and Trimble, 1991](#)). [Baxter \(1979\)](#) found that the journey itself, as a component of the tourism product, could give satisfaction in its own right so that, on occasions, longer distances are preferred. As fundamental motivation of tourism, people have a desire to visit new places and seek novelty experiences encompassing spatial mobility ([Lee and Crompton, 1992](#)), which refers to the “Ulysses factor”. [Anderson \(1970\)](#) initially introduced the term of “Ulysses factor” expressing people's need for adventure as a motivational force stimulating them to do something extraordinary and include some degree of risk ([Pearce, 2012](#)). [Wolfe \(1970\)](#) consistently identified that the friction cost of travel distance could be reduced or even reversed when the idea that “the further people go, further they want to go” ([Wolfe, 1972, p. 73](#)) is considered. From an economic perspective, [Nicolau \(2008\)](#) demonstrated that distance can also bring about positive utility. For example, travelers who choose a faraway distance tend to use land transport instead of air flights due to the opportunities it allows them to see sundry sights on their way to the destination.

A non-linear (or curvilinear) relationship may also be considered in regards to distance and travel decisions. Distance decay exists in a pattern: as travel distance increases, demand for the destination declines exponentially (or a frictional effect on demand) ([Mckercher and Lew, 2003](#)). A series of research studies conducted by [Mckercher \(1998\)](#), [Mckercher and Lew \(2003\)](#), [McKercher et al. \(2008\)](#) identified that specific patterns of distance decay were particularly related to the travel context, such as effective tourism exclusion zones. That is, demand increases with distance, up to a certain level. After that threshold, demand decreases as distance increases. More specifically, the curve peaks closer to the origin and then declines exponentially following the shape of lognormal distribution as the perceived costs of travel distance and time increase ([Bull, 1991](#)). This pattern suggests that people need to travel a minimum distance for a vacation in order to feel far away from their home in a sufficient way, and thus make an overnight journey worthwhile ([Mckercher and Lew, 2003](#)). More importantly, the friction of distance is negligible after a certain point and then, it turns to be a favorable attribute of the benefits of the experience ([Nyaupane et al., 2003](#); [Nicolau, 2008](#)). Accordingly, it can be argued that the

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