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Customer Mood and Service Quality Evaluation of Tour Operations

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Meng and sirakaya-Turk: Customer Mood and Service Quality Evaluation of Tour Operations

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Customer Mood and Service Quality Evaluation of Tour Operations
International CHRIE Conference-Refereed Track, Event 26 [2010]

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the moderating effect of tourists' moods on service evaluations of tour operations and overall trip satisfaction. The study used a sample of Germany tourists who traveled to the Mediterranean region of Turkey. The overall hypothesis of the paper is that tourists' assessments of service and satisfaction may not be free of bias, but may depend on the emotional state (such as mood) during the evaluation stage. The findings of the study are consistent with extant literature in the area in that a tourist's mood does influence his/her response to tour operations and overall trip satisfaction level.

Keywords: mood, customer satisfaction, tour operation, moderator variable, packaged tours

1. **Introduction**

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The measurement of tourist evaluations and satisfaction are critical for a successful and sustainable tourism industry. Traditionally, marketing literature views consumer satisfaction as cognitive processes involving semantic meaning of product and service attributes (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). In recent years, researchers have been increasingly paying attention to the role of affect and emotions/mood in consumer behavior in general and satisfaction studies in particular. Studies show that the evaluation of services, places, objects, or ideas is directly related to mood (affective) states of consumers; consumers tend to provide more favorable evaluations while in positive mood, and less favorable in negative mood states (Johnson & Tversky, 1983; Knowles, Grove, & Burroughs, 1993; Miniard, Bhatla, & Sirdehmunkh, 1992).

Consumer behaviorists and marketers have extensively examined the nature and role of customer satisfaction in a variety of service settings; however, the influence of affective states (such as mood) on service evaluation and postconsumption behavior has been largely neglected altogether or given scant attention (Liljander & Mattsson, 2002; Mattila & Wirtz, 2000). There is enough evidence, though, to suggest that such affective states do bias research outcomes and associated management response (Sirakaya, Choi and Petrick 2004). A review of satisfaction studies indicate that most researchers remain oblivious to findings emanating from this line of research. Of course, it would be relatively cumbersome to obtain and check for such bias any time satisfaction scores are assessed. Nevertheless, it is our conviction that measurement and removal of such bias is paramount to successful management of operations as well as employee reward programs.

In order to generate a more accurate understanding of the nature and context of tourist satisfaction, there is a need to examine the importance and the role of mood on service evaluations. The research objectives of this particular study are threefold: 1) to determine service quality dimensions of a packaged-tour and 2) to explore the effect (moderating) of mood on consumers' minds when evaluating tourism operations and services.

Background and the Research Model

There is a plethora of marketing and tourism studies on service quality or customer satisfaction; however, most research, if not all, is based on a general premise that tourists are able to reflect their cognition truly and free of bias (Bejou, Edvaardsson, & Rakowski, 1996; LeBlanc, 1992). According to Peterson and

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Wilson (1992: 62), the majority of responses in all self-reported customer satisfaction indicate that customers³

are satisfied and the distribution itself is negatively skewed. This positivity bias and negatively skewed satisfaction rating may lead to the real question that should be asked: “to what extent do customers’ self-reports of satisfaction reflect ‘true’ satisfaction ratings of tourism operations? Are there any other variables that systematically or artificially influence customer satisfaction ratings?” (Peterson & Wilson, 1992:62).

There are a limited number of studies in the general service literature that examines the impact of affective states such as mood and emotions generated by leisure consumption experiences, and even fewer studies focus on the moderating impact of mood states on tourist satisfaction (Sirakaya, Petrick, & Choi, 2004; Zins, 2002). For tourism operators and managers, it is important to examine the mood state of a customer during a service encounter, as well as the mood they are in while formally evaluating the service. In-depth understanding of mood’s impact might help detect true nature of tourists’ states of mind, and generate a capacity to maintain, enhance or repair customers’ mood states and related service experience through various management and contextual means.

Research model

The conceptual framework of the study is similar to the one that was proposed by Sirakaya and his colleagues in 2004 and is presented in Figure 1. The study proposes the hypothesis that tourists’ moods play a moderating role that influences the nature and magnitude of the relationship between the evaluation of tour operations and tourists’ overall satisfaction. In other words, the increase in tourists’ overall satisfaction, associated with increases in satisfaction with tour operation attributes, increases for tourists in a positive mood compared to tourists in a negative mood at the time of evaluation.

The research framework suggests a moderating effect of tourist mood instead of a mediating effect. A moderating variable influences the direction and/or strength of the relation between the independent variables (in this study, evaluation of the tour operations) and the dependent variable (i.e., tourist overall satisfaction). The mediator, on the other hand, implies a causal relationship with the independent and dependent variables respectively (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Based on the existing literature, the moderating role of mood suggests a more appropriate relationship between tourists’ evaluation of tour operations and their overall satisfaction.

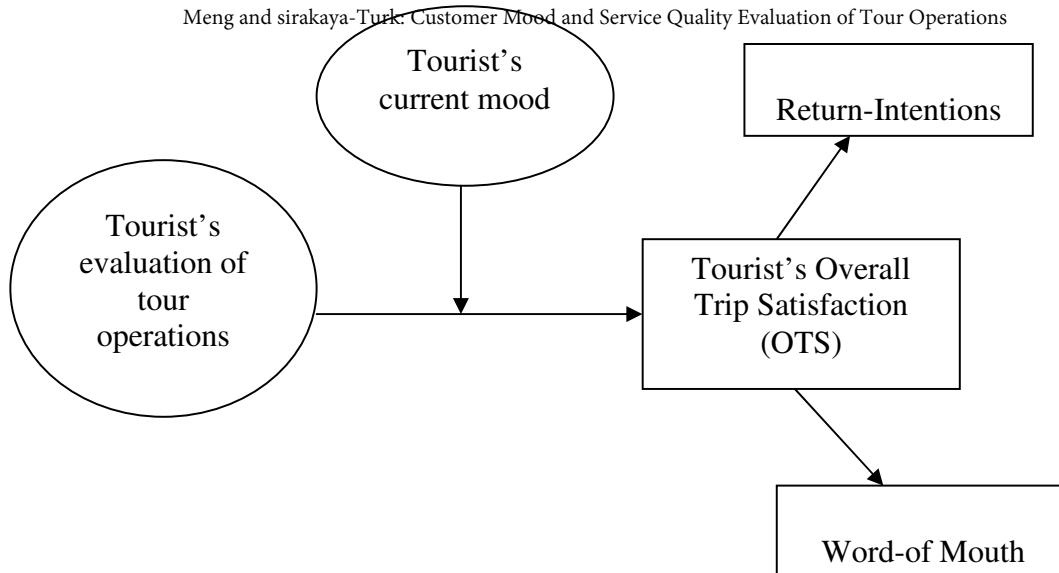


Figure 1. Research Framework

Methodology

The independent variable – tourists’ evaluation on quality of tour operations – was measured using a 36-item, 5-point Likert-type scale. The travelers were asked to consider their prior expectations of the trip quality and indicate the extent of tour operators’ performance related to their expectations. The scale ranged from “1 = performed worse than my expectation” to “5 = performed better than my expectation”. Principal component analysis with a varimax rotation was used to determine the underlying dimensions of the 36 items measuring service quality of tour operations (See Table 1). The dependent variable for this study was the tourists’ overall trip satisfaction (OTS), which was operationalized by asking respondents to indicate how much they agree or disagree with six-item questions regarding the overall vacation experience (1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree). The overall trip satisfaction scale was comprised of six questions: Vacation in Turkey... “...gave me unique or special moments”, “...had special meaning to me”, “...was as good as I expected”, “...was satisfying to me”, “...stands out as one of my best experiences”, and “...was worth the price I paid for it”. Two correlates of satisfaction measured in this study were behavioral intention items: tourists’ intention to return (“How likely is that you could come back to spend your vacation in Turkey in the future?”), and word of mouth (“How likely is that you would recommend Turkey to your friends and

relatives?”) on a scale ranging from 1 = highly unlikely to 6 = highly likely. The mood scale was used to

investigate the manipulation effect of mood on service evaluation of tour operations (adapted from the *International CHRIE Conference-Refereed Track, Event 26 [2010]* Peterson and Sauber 1983 mood short form). The scale consisted of four Likert-type scale items ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Data were collected by using a self-administered survey method. A contact tour guide, along with other tour guides of a collaborating tour company, helped to collect data in the Mediterranean region of Turkey, which is described as the Turkish Riviera. A sample of 500 all-inclusive travelers was asked to fill out a structured questionnaire. As a result, a total of 365 useable questionnaires were applied in the data analysis, indicating a response rate of 73% which is sufficient to continue analysis without a non-response bias.

Results and Conclusion

Profile of respondents

The sample of the tourist respondents was composed of 45.4% males and 54.6% females, and the majority of the respondents were middle-aged or senior people (43.3% were 46-64 years of age, and 31% were 65 years or older), with a median age of 56. Half of the respondents (51.7%) were employed and 36.8% were retired. About 48% of the respondents held less than 13 years of education, and 66.1% of them had an annual household income of less than €30,000 (only 7.8% made €60,000 yearly or more).

Moderating effect of mood on tour operation evaluation and trip satisfaction

The factor scores of study variables were used in the following regression to test the moderating impact of mood on the relationship between service quality evaluation of the tour operators and overall trip satisfaction. In other words, service evaluation factors were used in the regression analysis model, and mood scale served as a moderator variable. This method is standard practice when factors are to be used as an input for another analysis (Sirakaya, Petrick, & Choi, 2004). The following equation summarizes the computed relationship between the variables in the regression model:

$$OTS = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Factor 1} + \beta_2 \text{Factor 2} + \beta_3 \text{Factor 3} + \beta_4 \text{Factor 4} + \beta_5 \text{Mood} + \beta_6 (\text{Mood} * \text{Factor 1}) + \beta_7 (\text{Mood} * \text{Factor 2}) + \beta_8 (\text{Mood} * \text{Factor 3}) + \beta_9 (\text{Mood} * \text{Factor 4}) + \varepsilon$$

where OTS = Tourists' Trip Satisfaction; α = intercept; $\beta_1 \dots \beta_5$ = regression weights of main effects (Factor 1-4 and Mood); $\beta_6 \dots \beta_9$ = regression weights of independent variables/moderators interaction; ε = error.

A regression analysis was then conducted to assess the moderating effects of mood status in https://scholarworks.umass.edu/refereed/CHRIE_2010/Friday/26 evaluating tour operation quality and overall trip satisfaction. This statistical technique was used to perform a ⁶

moderated regression analysis to test for the incremental effect of independent variables (Tabachnick & Meng and sirakaya-Turk: Customer Mood and Service Quality Evaluation of Tour Operations Fidell, 1996). Regression analysis was performed in two stages. At the first stage, only the four tour operation factors and mood status were included in the regression analysis. At the second stage, interaction terms, i.e., the product of mood status and each of the four tour operation factors were added into the regression model. The moderating effect of mood exists when the interaction terms are found to be statistically significant in the regression, or change in R^2 is statistically significant between analysis stage 1 and 2.

Regarding the first stage analysis, the model testing the relationship between main effects (Factor 1, 2, 3, 4 and mood) and total trip satisfaction was statistically significant ($R^2 = .40$; $F = 33.28$, $p < .001$), explaining 40.3% of the variation in the model. At the second stage of analysis, four interaction terms (Mood * Factor1, Mood * Factor2, Mood * Factor3, and Mood * Factor4) were added to the main-effects model and the result was statistically significant ($R^2 = .43$; $F = 20.26$, $p < .001$), explaining 42.9% of the variation in the model. The change in R^2 from the main-effects model to the full model was significant ($\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p < .05$) indicating that the moderating effects of mood on tour operation evaluations explained a significant amount of variance with respect to overall trip satisfaction. In the model, the main effects, Factor 2 “Staff/Tour Guide Behavior” ($\beta_2 = 1.21$, $t = 2.57$, $p < .05$) and Mood ($\beta_5 = .59$, $t = 2.03$, $p < .05$) were significant. Among the four interaction terms for the main effects (Factor 1, 2, 3, and 4), two interaction terms – Mood * Factor 2 “Staff/Tour Guide Behavior” ($\beta_7 = -1.79$, $t = -2.42$, $p < .05$), and Mood * Factor 4 “Local Tour/Attitudes” ($\beta_9 = 1.13$, $t = 2.01$, $p < .05$) – accounted for a significant amount of incremental variance pointing to a significant moderating effect of mood related to tour operation evaluations (see Table 1).

Table 1. Exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation

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| Scales | | | Factor loadings | | | | |
|--|-------------------|------|-----------------|------------|------------|------------|----------|
| | Mean ^a | SD | F1 | F2 | F3 | F4 | α |
| Factor 1: Empathy/Friendliness | 32.02 | 6.07 | | | | | 0.92 |
| Attending my needs promptly | 3.40 | .83 | .75 | | | | |
| Interested in solving my problems | 3.43 | .84 | .74 | | | | |
| Understanding my specific needs | 3.38 | .83 | .73 | | | | |
| Staff made traveling more enjoyable | 3.71 | .83 | .68 | | | | |
| Coach (guides attendance, guides interpretation, coach's seating arrangement etc.) | 3.74 | .97 | .68 | | | | |
| Pre-tour briefing (references to shopping; food, fees etc.) | 3.33 | 1.02 | .67 | | | | |
| Visiting scenic spots (manner and content of the guide's interpretation of scenic-spots, additions or deductions of scenic-spots). | 3.76 | .98 | .67 | | | | |
| Got things right first time | 3.40 | .76 | .66 | | | | |
| Staff (travel guide) never too busy to respond | 3.87 | .83 | .64 | | | | |
| Factor 2: Staff/Tour Guides Behavior | 35.97 | 5.96 | | | | | 0.92 |
| Delivered services on time | 3.52 | .72 | | .74 | | | |
| Knowledgeable staff | 3.71 | .77 | | .72 | | | |
| Staff consistently courteous | 3.83 | .78 | | .72 | | | |
| Behavior of staff gave confidence | 3.52 | .75 | | .62 | | | |
| Staff made me feel secure | 3.63 | .74 | | .62 | | | |
| Staff always willing to help | 3.81 | .72 | | .62 | | | |
| Travelers' best interests at heart | 3.58 | .80 | | .59 | | | |
| Individualized attention to travelers | 3.45 | .83 | | .55 | | | |
| Staff kept customers informed | 3.40 | .80 | | .50 | | | |
| No excessive waiting time | 3.51 | .87 | | .48 | | | |
| Factor 3: Tourist Facilities/Amenities | 21.07 | 3.22 | | | | | 0.77 |
| Transfers (to and from airport, hotels etc.) | 3.67 | .74 | | | .68 | | |
| Accommodations (hotel rooms, hotel facilities) | 3.53 | .83 | | | .66 | | |
| Restaurants (quality, consideration to dietary habits etc.) | 3.51 | .85 | | | .62 | | |
| Good facilities | 3.65 | .74 | | | .59 | | |
| Bus was highly suitable | 3.54 | .79 | | | .53 | | |
| Airplane's seating arrangement (Custom and immigration procedures; baggage handling etc.) | 3.19 | .81 | | | .45 | | |
| Factor 4: Local Tour/Attitudes | 12.49 | 5.01 | | | | | 0.69 |
| Optional tour (content and addition of optional tours; treatment of nonparticipating customers, fees etc.) | 2.94 | .89 | | | | .69 | |
| Attitude of locals toward visitors | 3.33 | .84 | | | | .63 | |
| Individual Shopping (quality, availability, manner of shopping; product refunds etc.) | 3.19 | .79 | | | | .61 | |
| Tips (the manner of tip collection by the guide etc.) | 3.04 | .63 | | | | .59 | |
| Eigenvalue | | | 11.72 | 2.25 | 1.56 | 1.27 | |
| Explained variance by factors (%) | | | 40.42 | 7.77 | 5.37 | 4.39 | |

^a Items measured on a 5-point Likert scale; KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy = .94; Barlett's test of

Significance $p < .001$; Total variance extracted by the four factors is 57.94%.

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Therefore, based on the regression analysis results, the overall model contained two main effects (Factor 2 “Staff/Tour Guide Behavior”, and Mood), and two interaction effects (Mood * Factor 2 “Staff/Tour Guide Behavior”, and Mood * Factor 4 “Local Tour/Attitudes”). It indicated a significant direct and indirect mood effect when predicting customers’ overall trip satisfaction. The full regression equation should be described as:

$$\text{Tourists' overall trip satisfaction [OTS]} = 1.21[\beta_2]\text{Staff/Tour Guide Behavior} + .59[\beta_5]\text{Mood} - 1.79[\beta_7]\text{Mood*Staff/Tour Guide Behavior} + 1.13[\beta_9]\text{Mood*Local}$$

Tour/Attitudes

The β_7 coefficient for the product term suggests that the interaction effect of mood and Factor 2 (“Staff/Tour Guide Behavior”) was the most important predictor of overall trip satisfaction, followed by the main effect of staff/tour guide behavior ($\beta_2=1.21$). Staff/tour guide behavior and mood, as individual variables which have main effects, both positively associate with tourists’ overall tour satisfaction. For the product term Mood*Local Tour/Attitudes, as respondents move from lower to higher mood states (i.e., a unit increase in mood), the slope for evaluation of local tour/attitudes on customers’ overall tour satisfaction (OTS) would increase by 1.13 units (the positive slope for Factor 4 “Local Tour/Attitude” would become incrementally more strong and positive, i.e., the slope becomes steeper). Similarly, a unit increase of the evaluation of local tour/attitude attribute would make the slope for the effect of mood on OTS to increase by 1.13 units. In other words, the mood effect is greater at higher levels of satisfaction with local tour/attitudes than at lower levels, and the satisfaction with local tour/attitudes effect on OTS is stronger for higher mood conditions than lower ones. On the contrary, in terms of the interaction effects of product term Mood*Staff/Tour Guide Behavior, as respondents move from higher to lower mood states (i.e., one unit decrease in mood), the slope for evaluation of staff/tour guide behavior on OTS would decrease by 1.79 units, indicating that mood effect is greater at lower levels of satisfaction with staff/tour guide than at higher levels. Therefore, if not satisfied with the staff/tour guide, tourists in lower moods tend to give lower overall satisfaction scores (negative β_7 coefficient for interaction term) than tourists in higher mood conditions; whereas if satisfied with the local tour/attitudes, tourists in higher moods would give higher OTS scores (positive β_9 for interaction term) than those in lower mood states (see Table 2).

Table 2. Effects of mood on overall trip satisfaction

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| Variables | Beta coeff. | t-value | R squared (R ²) | F change | Sig. F change |
|-------------------------|-------------|---------|-----------------------------|----------|---------------|
| Stage 1 analysis | | | .40 | 33.28 | .000 |
| Factor 1 | .34 | 4.72* | | | |
| Factor 4 | .24 | 3.68* | | | |
| Stage 2 analysis | | | .43 | 20.26 | .000 |
| Factor 2 | 1.21 | 2.57** | | | |
| Mood | .59 | 2.03** | | | |
| Mood * Factor 2 | -1.79 | -2.42** | | | |
| Mood * Factor 4 | 1.13 | 2.01** | | | |

Dependent variable = overall trip satisfaction; Factor 1 = Empathy/Friendliness; Factor 2 = Staff/Tour Guides Behavior; Factor 4 = Local Tour/Attitudes

* p < .001, ** p < .05

Adjusted R² = .41; N = 253.

Note: Only variables which were statistically significant were included in the table.

In order to further verify the moderating impact of mood, a simple effects analysis was then conducted to assess the unique influence of the different levels of the moderating variable (i.e., mood status) on tourists' overall trip satisfaction. Study respondents were divided into two groups by using K-means cluster analysis based on the four original mood items. Two clusters were identified and named as High Mood Group (N=145) and Low Mood Group (N=172) (all the F values were significant at .000 level, indicating significant differences between the two groups on each of the four mood items). Next, regression analyses were performed for the high/low mood groups across tour operation factor 2 (Staff/Tour Guide Behavior) and factor 4 (Local Tour/Attitudes). That is, trip satisfaction was regressed onto these two independent variables separately for participants in each of the high/low mood groups for comparison (see Table 3). The results showed that the effect of Factors 2 and 4 were significant in both low mood group (R² = .41, F = 40.82, p < .001) and high mood group (R² = .30, F = 31.04, p < .001). Furthermore, the beta coefficients for Factors 2 and 4 were significant in both low/high mood groups.

However, the value of beta coefficients in the two mood groups were different, indicating that "Staff/Tour Guide Behavior" and "Local Tour/Attitudes" had different importance in evaluating overall trip satisfaction when tourists were in low or high mood states. For tourists with low mood state, Staff/Tour Guide Behavior ($\beta = .48$, $t = 5.37$, $p < .001$) was a more significant predictor of trip satisfaction than Local Tour/Attitudes ($\beta = .21$, $t = 2.37$, $p < .05$). Conversely, when tourists had relatively high mood, Local Tour/Attitudes ($\beta = .37$, $t = 3.92$, $p < .001$) was a more significant predictor of trip satisfaction than Staff/Tour Guide Behavior ($\beta = .23$, $t = 2.37$, $p < .05$). This result validated the above discussion about the

interaction effect of Mood*Staff/Tour Guide Behavior and Mood*Local Tour/Attitudes on overall tour satisfaction.
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Table 3. Moderating effects of mood on overall trip satisfaction: comparison of high and low mood groups

| | Low mood group (N=145) | | High mood group (N=172) | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|----------|-------------------------|----------|
| | Factor 2 | Factor 4 | Factor 2 | Factor 4 |
| Beta coefficient (β) | .48 | .21 | .23 | .37 |
| t-value | 5.37* | 2.37** | 2.39** | 3.92* |
| R square (R^2) | .409 | | .303 | |
| F change | 40.82 | | 31.04 | |
| Sig. F change | .000 | | .000 | |

Dependent variable = overall trip satisfaction.

Factor 2 = Staff/Tour Guide Behavior; Factor 4 = Local Tour/Attitudes

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .05$.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study supported previous research findings by demonstrating that individuals' relatively low or high mood states are driven by differences in their respective tour operation evaluations when forming an overall satisfaction with the entire trip. Mood and staff/tour guide behavior positively associated with overall tour satisfaction rating. Mood, combined with the two factors "Staff/Tour Guide Behavior" and "Local Tour/Attitudes", have significant interaction effects on tourists' overall trip satisfaction. Furthermore, tourists' mood conditions would generate different satisfaction scores based on their evaluations of encountered services and experiences. When they are unsatisfied with the staff/tour guide, tourists in lower moods tend to give lower overall satisfaction scores than tourists in higher mood conditions; whereas when they feel satisfied with the local tour/attitudes, tourists in higher moods would give higher OTS scores than those in lower mood states.

Among the four major components regarding tour operation evaluations (i.e., the four factors in this study), tour operator staff and services, as well as local tour and attitudes of locals, were significant predictors of overall trip satisfaction rating. Specifically, when tourists had lower mood state, tour operation staff and tour guide behavior played a more significant role in predicting overall trip satisfaction than local tour and attitude of locals. Conversely, when tourists had higher mood states, evaluations of local tour and attitude of locals was a more significant predictor of overall trip satisfaction than the tour operator staff and tour guide behavior.

This particular study has both theoretical and practical implications. Research findings of the influence of mood on tourist evaluations and satisfaction ratings provide useful information for both

researchers and marketers. The findings suggest that mood can be a nuisance variable that influences consumer satisfaction ratings. Consumers' emotional and mood states may moderate the relationship among variables and give a biased result when satisfaction scores are either high or low. Therefore, when conducting consumer behavior studies a neutral state is preferred. Researchers may need to control for the moderating effect of mood state to ensure true and unbiased satisfaction ratings. The study findings provide support, although not conclusive, that mood states have an effect on how the tour operation services are assessed. This finding also implies that tourism and hospitality researchers should take affective states such as mood and emotions into consideration in service evaluation and customer satisfaction studies.

The study also provides practical implications for management and marketing in the tourism industry. Based on the study findings that mood can influence tourists' trip satisfaction ratings, tour operators should be aware that satisfaction scores may not be fully accurate in reflecting the true performance of employees and quality of service/products, but often mixed with tourists' emotion and mood states. Positive evaluation scores may not necessarily mean that there are no problems in the service delivery and tour operation system. Therefore, when examining the satisfaction ratings, management needs to differentiate the low-end scores and highly positive responses. It is equally important to separately analyze the tourists who express dissatisfaction and those satisfied customers due to the effect of mood on satisfaction ratings. The results of this study also provide potential ways for tour operators and travel agents to increase satisfaction by improving their understandings of the complexity of tourist moods/emotions.

This study has its own limitations which may put restrictions on the implications of its findings. According to Peterson and Wilson (1992), there are a number of variables – for example, life satisfaction, organizational variables, attitudes toward the tourism product, personal values and age – that may influence the evaluation of tourism product and services and overall satisfaction. Mood is only one of these variables that could possibly alter the assessment ratings with bias due to psychological influence. Future studies could focus on other variables' moderating effect on tour operation evaluations and trip satisfaction. Another interesting extension of the current research is to examine the reciprocal relationship between mood and tour operation evaluations, since mood can affect tour operation assessment, and at the same time, mood can be influenced by the various encounters during the tour operation service delivery and arrangement.

Future research shall examine the effect of mood on pre-determined factors of satisfaction such as excitement factors, or other post-experience perceptions including loyalty to the same tour operator, repeat

visitation intentions, and so on. Mood was found to have impact on information encoding and image/impression formation: people tend to store the memory of the mood related to the initial stage of impression formation of a person or object, and retrieve the evaluations influenced by previous mood when assessing the same person/object (Curren & Harich, 1994). Therefore, in line with other researchers' such as Mattila (1998) and Sirakaya et al (2004) propositions, tourists' moods should be examined not only at the post-consumption phase, but during the pre-purchase stages of decision-making when images and consideration sets are formed. Thus time-series and experimental studies become extremely important if we were to understand the true nature and impact of mood states on consumption behavior.

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