

# VISITOR SATISFACTION REVISITED: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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## 1.0. Introduction

Service providers are motivated to evaluate and improve their service quality primarily because doing so leads to visitor satisfaction, which has been shown to increase visitation, lead to positive word-of-mouth and, eventually, greater revenue (Baker & Crompton, 2000). Generating visitor satisfaction is particularly important in heritage tourism where a significant increase in visitors is necessary to ensure long-term sustainability (Kinghorn & Willis, 2008).

What is tourist satisfaction and how is it measured? The main purpose of this article is to answer this question. In this article we will first review the meanings associated with customer satisfaction and the notion of quality. We will then review methods researchers use to assess satisfaction. Finally, to provide readers with an example of how customer satisfaction can be successfully measured in a heritage tourism context, a case study of Persepolis, a world heritage site located in Shiraz, Iran, is presented.

## 2.0 Satisfaction

While satisfaction has been found to be one of the most important sources of competitiveness in tourism destinations (Yuan, Wu, Zhang, Goh & Stout, 2008), there has been a debate over the determinant variables of satisfaction and their measurement. In the past researchers generally considered satisfaction as a *cognitive* state with a relative character; that is, the comparison of a subjective experience with a previous base of reference. This comparison of past experience (i.e., expectations) with perceived performance is the foundation of the widely-used *expectation-disconfirmation* paradigm. According to this paradigm, if perceived performance is superior (inferior) to expectations formed by personal experience, word-of-mouth or media (Nowacki, 2005), a positive disconfirmation and an increase (decrease) in satisfaction will follow. It should be noted that the quality of the experience is also considered a contributing factor to overall satisfaction.

### 2.1 Satisfaction and quality

The terms, “satisfaction” and “quality” are at times used interchangeably, but are considered to be distinct and comprised of unique properties. Parasuraman, Zithamland and Berry (1998) defined quality as a composed attitude toward a service, obtained during a number of experiences over time; while satisfaction is related to a specific transaction (Baker & Crompton,

2000). Further, quality is primarily controlled by the supplier while satisfaction (being a state of mind) may be influenced by the social-psychological state that a tourist brings to a site, such as mood, disposition and needs, or external factors such as climate and group interactions, which are usually beyond the provider's control (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Nowacki, 2005). Generally, while quality is not equivalent to satisfaction, it affects satisfaction in three ways: first as a result of dis/confirmation with expectations; second, by creating pleasure (affective component of satisfaction); and third, through direct effect in situations where the customer is experiencing a product for the first time and has no previous expectations.

### **3.0 Common approaches to measuring tourist satisfaction**

A common approach to measuring tourist satisfaction is identifying the prominent attributes that define an attraction and then asking tourists to rate them on a symmetrical one-dimensional scale with "totally satisfied" on one end and "totally dissatisfied" on the other end of the scale (Phaswana-Mafuya & Haydam, 2005). An equally common approach is to first measure tourists' expectations for and the perceived quality of the attractions' attributes by using the expectation-disconfirmation paradigm, differentiate between the two to get at satisfaction. However, there are a number of flaws related to these satisfaction measurements which will be described in the following paragraphs.

#### **3.1 Flaws in current measurements of tourist satisfaction**

First, according to Yuan et al. (2008), "expectations" are not constant and are difficult to measure. Expectations are formed based on different sources such as friends' word-of-mouth (WOM), advertisements, and previous experiences at similar destinations, all of which change over time. Expectations also change *during* tourists visit to a destination. Second, it is sometimes hard for tourists to distinguish between their expectations and perceived performance of a site (Yuan et al., 2008), especially in situations where visitors are confronted with new products. Third, it is often difficult for individuals to form precise expectations (de Carmen & Camarero, 2008). This is especially true with heritage tourists who hold ideal expectations that are altered during their first (and perhaps only) visit. Fourth, the differences in scores on a symmetrical one-dimensional scale often demonstrate no discriminant validity. Fifth, when a component score used to calculate difference (either expectation or perceived performance) is consistently higher than the other component score, variance restriction occurs (Alegre & Garau, 2010). Six, when expectations are low, even poor service will result in a relatively high level of satisfaction, which could be misleading (Yuan et al., 2008). And, seven, when tourists' expectations of the presence of certain attributes are not fully met, there is no sense in asking about their view-point about unmet attributes after their visit.

For example, in a study performed in South Africa by Phaswana-Mafuya and Haydam (2005), travelers' expectations and perceptions were measured, but the authors recognized that some of the attributes travelers expected were not actually present. Perhaps providing the services that tourists expect and then assessing their level of satisfaction with them would be a better way to assess satisfaction. This approach is referred to as the *Performance-only method* (Kozak, 2001).

#### **3.2 Performance-only method for measuring satisfaction**

Researchers who use the performance-only method believe that tourists unconsciously compare perceptions and expectations mentally when they are asked about their perceptions of the services provided. Thus, only the perceived performance of a service provider is measured on a

continuum with “totally satisfied” on one end and “totally dissatisfied” on the other. However, similar to the expectation-disconfirmation methods, there are problems associated with this kind of measurement.

To begin, satisfaction scales often include *pull factors*, i.e. attributes that constitute the very reasons why tourists chose to visit that specific destination (Alegre & Garau, 2010). When asked to document their level of satisfaction with the attributes tourists tend to be highly satisfied with them. Alternatively, negative attributes such as crowding, commercial overdevelopment or pollution are usually excluded from the list of attributes. Hence, the opportunity for tourists to indicate dissatisfaction is reduced or eliminated all together.

Second, attributes can generate simultaneous feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Alegre & Garau, 2010). For example, at a heritage site, tourists might be satisfied with the interpretation provided by the local tour guide in some instances, but not in others. Or, they might value being exposed to the local lifestyle, but simultaneously be negatively affected by the absence of international standards (e.g., access to clean, hot water).

Third, after all of the investments (e.g., monetary, social, psychological) tourists make to visit an attraction they usually provide higher satisfaction ratings. Thus, there is always a positive bias in performance-only methods of measuring satisfaction. Fourth, the more highly motivated individuals are to experience a specific attribute, the more likely they are to rate it positively (Alegre & Garau, 2010).

Fifth, asking visitors to rate their level of satisfaction on a symmetrical one-dimensional scale suggests that an attribute can generate both satisfaction (if everything goes right) and dissatisfaction (if something goes wrong) at the same time. This notion was first observed by Herzberg (1959) in an organizational setting. He argued that qualifying factors (i.e., *hygienic factors*) insulate against dissatisfaction while *motivating factors* cause delight, but this is only the case once qualifying factors have been satisfied. Thus, the presence of hygienic factors does not necessarily bring about satisfaction and the absence of motivating factors does not necessarily raise dissatisfaction. For example, in a bank setting, honest service is an inseparable part of doing business. In the absence of honesty individuals will be dissatisfied, contributing little to satisfaction.

On the other hand, the absence of being treated in a friendly way may not cause dissatisfaction, yet its presence can cause delight when the hygienic factor (i.e., honesty) is present. It is therefore suggested that when evaluating visitors' experience, attributes be measured along two different dimensions, i.e. satisfaction and dissatisfaction on separate continuums (Alegre and Garau, 2010).

In addition, satisfaction surveys usually consist of a large number of attributes extracted from the literature. The large number of attributes usually leads to long surveys, thus reducing the number of willing participants. Yoan, Wu, Zhang, Goh and Stout (2008) found that these types of surveys also lead to higher or lower than average satisfaction. Another common problem in some studies is that researchers claim that factors that do not show a significant positive effect on travelers' overall satisfaction are indeed dissatisfiers.

However, as discussed earlier, if a factor is not a satisfier, it does not necessarily mean that it is a dissatisfier. For example, the provision of a translator at a heritage site might not contribute significantly to the overall satisfaction of the tourists, but unless the quality is lower than expected, it does not bring upon dissatisfaction either.

### **3.4 Validity of quantitative methods for studying tourists' satisfaction**

Another problem is the *validity* of satisfaction measures. When attributes of a certain category of attractions or destinations are derived from the literature, they may not really relate to the specific attraction or destination being studied. Or, researchers may omit certain attributes based on their subjective judgment and/or ignore the attributes tourists deem to be important. These approaches likely affect the validity of the scale being used to measure satisfaction. To ensure validity, some researchers (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1988) suggest performing interviews before conducting surveys although it may be expensive and time consuming.

### **4.0 The Critical Incident Technique (CIT)**

In the past three decades one of the most popular qualitative methods used in service-based research is the Critical Incident Technique, which is a method to collect, content analyze and classify observations of human behavior based on a set of procedures (Holloway & Beatty, 2008). However, despite its wide utility in other areas of social science, CIT has rarely been used in the hospitality and tourism literature (e.g., Chung and Hoffman 1998; Jackson, White, & Schmierer 1996; Wang, Hsieh, & Huan 2000; Pearce & Caltabiano 1983; Petrick, Tonner, & Quinn, 2006).

When using CIT, respondents are asked to tell a story about their experience. Then the short stories are content analyzed and the events are placed into categories. The main categories can be deduced from theoretical models or formed on the basis of inductive interpretation. The advantages and disadvantages of this approach are discussed in the following paragraphs. In terms of the advantages of CIT, the collected data are from the respondent's perspective and in his or her own words and there are no preconceptions. Respondents are simply asked to recall specific events while using their own terms and language. So, CIT does not restrict observations to a limited set of variables or activities.

Second, the CIT method produces unequivocal information as respondents have the opportunity to give a detailed account of their own experiences. Third, this type of research is inductive in nature and consequently it is especially useful when the topic being researched has had little documentation. Also, the CIT method is effective in situations where the researcher is studying phenomena for which it is hard to specify all variables beforehand. Whenever a human is involved, things get complicated and the factors that might cause satisfaction and dissatisfaction may at times be unpredictable. Moreover, the nature of tourism experiences and tourist expectations change constantly.

Finally, the CIT method is particularly well suited for use in assessing perceptions of visitors with different cultural backgrounds (Gremler, 2004); that is, it is a less culturally bound technique compared to traditional surveys that determine important aspects based on the

researchers point of view beforehand. This attribute is especially important in tourism where people from different cultures are engaged.

In terms of the drawbacks of CIT, this method has been criticized by some on the issues of reliability and validity and researchers need to do their best to avoid misinterpretation of reported stories and ambiguity associated with category labels in their studies. There are techniques which could help in these regards. Also, since CIT relies on recalling past memories, data collection needs to be performed immediately after visitors' exposure to services in order to avoid memory lapses. And, recruiting respondents who are willing to tell or write their whole stories of service exposure is not easy (Gremler, 2004). For an example of the implementation of CIT in a tourism context, refer to part 7.0 of this article. Please keep in mind that in this specific study, instead of studying sources of tourist *satisfaction* during a visit to a heritage site, sources of tourist *dissatisfaction* has been studied. The reason for adopting this approach is discussed below.

### **5.0 Studying dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction**

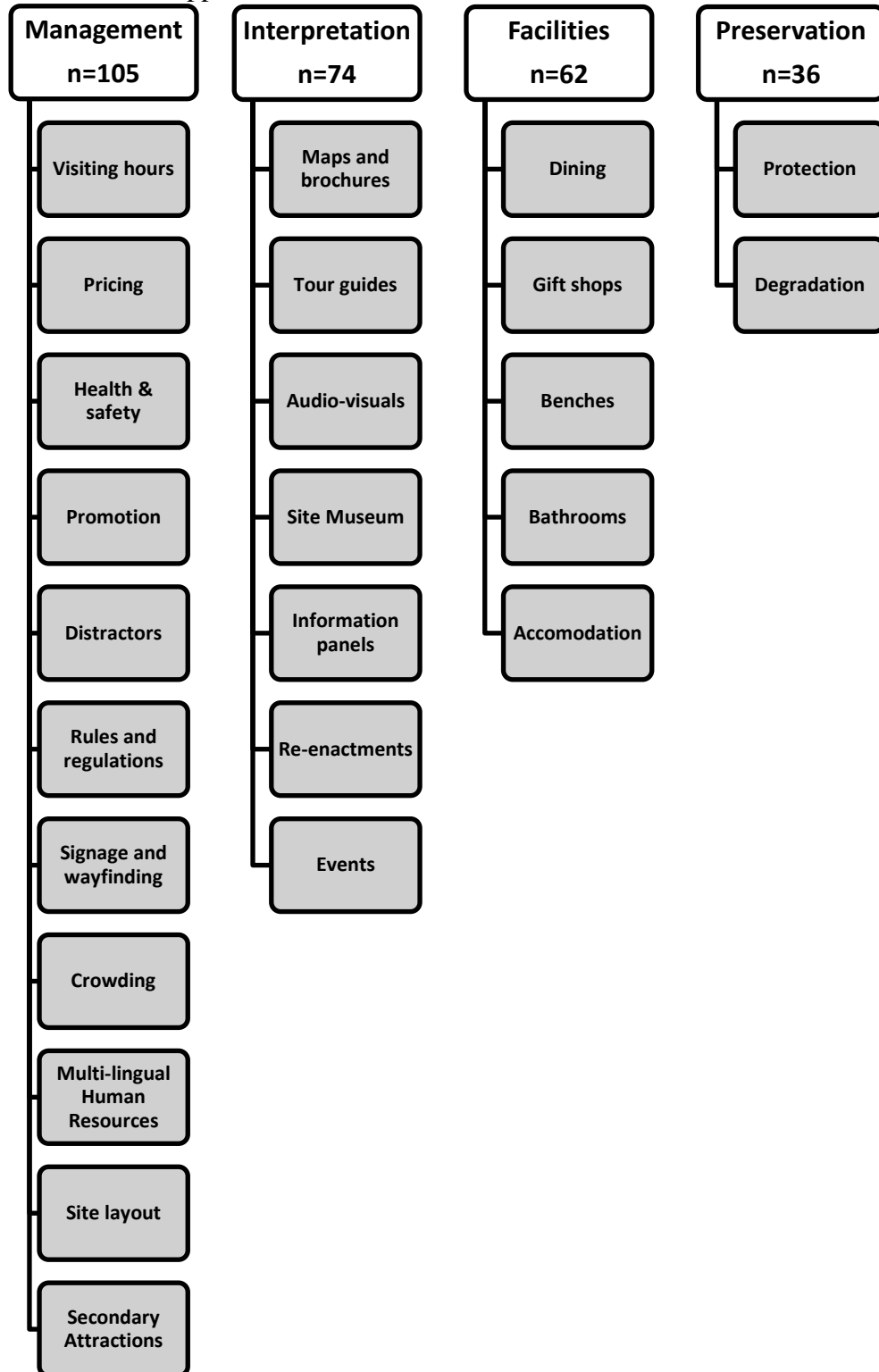
Research shows that every single moment can severely change a service experience, either positively or negatively (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994; Gremler, 2004; Petrick, Tonner, & Quinn, 2006). However, based on attribution theory, people usually take credit for their success and blame others for their failure (Pritchard & Havitz, 2005). In other words, tourists usually attach the causes for their positive experiences to themselves and the sources of their negative experiences to external factors. Thus, in the tourism literature, negative incidents have proven to have a bigger impact than positive incidents and studying them is argued to provide better information to managers (Alegre & Garau, 2010). The information which results from such evaluations can help managers to define appropriate appraisal initiatives, lay out suitable policies, and plan necessary educational programs (Bitner, et al., 1990).

As discussed earlier, motivational factors can cause satisfaction only when hygienic factors are present. Thus, it is important to explore and understand negative moments of truth (i.e., interactions or emotional responses that help develop a tourist's perception about the service provider) and see how they possibly affect tourists' experiences (Holloway & Beatty, 2008). Or, as Alegre and Garau (2010) perfectly put it, "the inclusion of explicit dissatisfaction-based evaluations can give more accurate results regarding a destination's ability to satisfy its tourists and spur them on to revisit" (p. 53). Especially since, as seen earlier, negative incidents are generally not recognized in satisfaction studies. On the other hand, based on prospect theory, "losses loom larger than gains when predicting behavior" (Petrick et al., 2006, p. 278), suggesting that negative incidents have been found to be more related to visitor's satisfaction, perceived value, WOM, and repurchase intentions than positive incidents (Petrick et al., 2006). From a managerial perspective, service providers need to initially explore potential negative incidents, direct their investments towards minimizing them, and then plan to create positive incidents.

### **6.0 CIT in Practice**

In 2011, Shahvali (2012) interviewed a sample of 69 international tourists and 31 tour guides who visited Persepolis, a world heritage site located in Shiraz, Iran. The interviews which lasted between 2 and 16 minutes were performed at the end of a site tour. The interviews focused on encounters that affected tourists' experiences as well as ways in which the experience could be improved.

Figure 1. Results of CIT approach



Data analysis involved numerous steps including: independent coding by two researchers, development of a consistent coding scheme, data reduction, and reliability testing. Split-half reliability (.96) and inter-judge reliability (.96) indicated that the data were coded consistently

and reliably. A total of 277 negative incidents were recorded. After data reduction, 26 subcategories and 4 recurring themes were identified and labeled (See Figure 1): “Facilities” (e.g., dining, bathrooms, gift shops), “Interpretation” (e.g., maps and brochures, audio-visuals, tour guides), “Preservation” (e.g., preservation and restoration of the heritage site), and “Management” (e.g. health issues, signage, pricing policies, crowding).

For a list of all emerging subcategories refer to the chart below. “Facilities” and “Interpretation” comprised the most reported incidents. This was a surprising finding as “Preservation” is usually cited as a main source of satisfaction in service evaluations of heritage sites (Jewell & Crotts, 2002).

Using CIT allowed the researchers to identify specific types of incidents that led to dissatisfaction in a heritage tourism context. Compared to traditional assessments of satisfaction, which often include one or more general statements, the CIT provided much more actionable results. For example, based on the results, site managers should focus their efforts, dollars, and labor on “Facilities” and “Interpretation,” the primary areas in which negative incidents occurred. The fact that “Preservation” was not a primary source of negative incidents may suggest that visitors pay more attention to other factors such as interpretation of the site, or that management has done a very good job of preserving and restoring the site. Future research should build on the findings in this study in an effort to develop a conceptual framework that can be used in tourism satisfaction research, particularly in a heritage tourism context.

## 7.0 Conclusion

While the study of visitor satisfaction is becoming increasingly popular among managers of tourism sites, the methods used are contaminated with flaws that affect the outcomes and implications. In this article, the many problems associated with quantitative approaches to measuring satisfaction were discussed. An option, the CIT, was introduced as a better approach to evaluating tourist satisfaction. In the example below, CIT has been used to investigate the sources of dissatisfaction of travelers visiting Persepolis, which is a world heritage site located in Shiraz, Iran.

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