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Quality Tourism Experiences: A qualitative study of Australian Gold Coast residents' perspectives as tourists in a group tour to China



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Introduction

The purpose of this extended abstract is to introduce a Quality Filtering of Mediators Model. The model and its components explain the process of how participating Australian Gold Coast residents, as tourists, benchmarked a group tour to China experience against previous tourism experiences to evaluate the *quality* of their China group tourism experience.

In the past, industry and research have primarily focussed on service quality and its determinants (Guiry, Scott, & Vequist IV, 2013; Kvist & Klefsjö, 2006; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993), whereas this study situates itself within the burgeoning experience literature (Morgan, Lugosi, & Ritchie, 2010; Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Patterson & Pegg, 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 2011). This extended abstract contributes to that literature by introducing the above model, which is one aspect of a broader study of *quality tourism experiences* as experienced by Gold Coast residents on a group tour to China.

Literature review

Quality tourism experience is a term that is difficult to define (Arnould, Price, & Otnes, 1999). This is partly because of the “multiplicity of perspectives” of multiple stakeholders, such as, government agencies, industry bodies and suppliers, host communities and tourists (Arnould et al., 1999; Jennings, 2006) as well as the subjectivity of interpretations (Jennings, 2006). To date, research in relation to *quality tourism experiences (QTEs)* (Jennings and Nickerson, 2006) has focused on individual tourist’s experiences. For example, Andereck, Bricker, Kerstetter and Nickerson (2006) connect experiences, place and quality. Cater (2001) examined the experiences of adventure travellers and introduced the concept of *embodiment* of tourists in their experiences, while Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung (2007) studied the tourist experiences of bed and breakfast owners and guests. These studies identify attributes of the nature of tourism experiences that tourists deem increases the quality of tourism experiences. Within the experience literature, authors have considered evaluations of experiences and evaluations of immersion from holistic perspectives with an unexplored link to quality and satisfaction (Arnould et al., 1999;

Carù & Cova, 2003, 2007; Knutson & Beck, 2004; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 2011). Few studies, however, have considered group tours with regard to quality tourism experiences and it is here that our study makes its major contribution.

Our study contributes to extant experience literature by moving beyond the mere identification of attributes of quality tourism experiences to capture the process that participants in a China tour group (CTG) respectively employed to evaluate the *quality* of their China tourism experiences. The study found that participating group tourists to China applied a set of *quality filters*, which were coined as: *practicality*, *functionality*, *aesthetics* and *familiarity*. These quality filters were used to evaluate five quality mediators: Tour leader, Locally hosted visits, Tour elements, Tour group, and Tour destination. Using the filters, the tour participants were able to benchmark the China tour against previous tourism experiences in order to evaluate the *quality* of the group tour experience. At particular points throughout the tour, certain participants experienced *embodiment*, which served to heighten the overall perceived *quality* of their tourism experience.

Methodology

As already intimated, tourism experiences are multifaceted and inherently subjective (Arnould et al., 1999; Jennings, 2006). Subsequently, an interpretive constructivist approach drawing on phenomenology and ethnography, was used to (re)interpret and understand the CTG participants' multiple and subjective perspectives of a *quality group tour experience*. Specifically, phenomenology is associated with "describ[ing] the meaning of the lived experiences for ... individuals about a ... phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 236). Wherein 'lived' experiences refers to "individual experiences of people as conscious human beings" (Creswell, 1998, p. 236). In addition, ethnography centres on the commonplace, customary behaviours of people in their everyday lives. Both phenomenology and ethnography ensured a "goodness of fit" (Jennings, 2010; Silverman, 2011, 2013) between the study's research purpose and its methodology.

Participants in this study were 21 Gold Coast, Australian residents on a fully inclusive guided tour of China offered by a Gold Coast tour provider between 2007 and 2012. The exact year of the tour has been with-held to provide anonymity to

participants. Empirical material collection methods included a focus group, participant observation, Quick Thinks, and in-depth interviews. Participation observation enabled the chief researcher, as a member of the China tour group, to become one of the CTG participants documenting their everyday practices from an insider (emic) and 'outsider' (etic) perspective.

Transcripts of empirical materials were uploaded into NVivo and open coded into specific topics or concepts. An iterative successive approximation interpretation method revealed lower-order and higher-order concepts and their (re)interpretations associated with the participants' *quality filtered* perceptions of what they deemed constituted a *quality tourism experience*. This method is exemplified in Appendix A. Researcher reflexivity was continually practised to maximise participant focus and authenticity of (re)interpretations. The (re)interpretation of participant perspectives was grounded by revisiting some of the participants to ensure "goodness of fit" of the emergent theory. As with all qualitative research, this research is specific to the participants in this study, that is, the 21 retired, self-funded, Gold Coast, Australian residents who preferred luxury travel to what they deemed were 'exotic' destinations, in this case, China.

Quality filtering of mediators model

The study found four *quality filters* were used by the CTG participants. As already stated, these were *pricality*, *funcitonality*, *aesthetics* and *familiarity*. The filters were used to evaluate the mediating concepts that the group tour participants perceived contributed to their *quality tourism experiences*. Again, those quality mediators were Tour leader, Locally hosted visits, Tour elements, Tour group, and Tour destination. The quality mediators were the go-betweens or intermediaries (Jennings & Weiler, 2004, 2006) that connected a CTG participant's *quality filters* to a *quality tourism experience*. The *quality* of the tour was further heightened if and when *embodiment* was a component of a participant's experience.

Each of the coined quality filter terms, *pricality*, *funcitonality*, *aesthetics*, *familiarity* plus *embodiment* are now defined:

Pricality distinguishes a duality of notions. One is the notion of the marketing term "cost" based on the premise of exchanging something for perceived equal or

greater “value” (Williams & Soutar, 2009) in monetary terms. The second are the more affective emotional, temporal, and experiential components (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982) associated with “value” of experience.

Functionality relates to practical and operative factors of the mediating concepts.

That is, all the components of the tour product supplied by hotels airlines, transport companies attractions and restaurants should operate at the standard “promised” by the tour operator and “expected” by the tourist.

Aesthetics refers to the experiential, emotional and environmental factors. Examples of *aesthetics* include “connectivity” with others, senses of “comfort”, “achievement”, “wellbeing”, or “excitement”.

Familiarity to the participants refers to a sense of the “known”, what to anticipate, which was associated with “safety” and “security”. Processing *familiarity* involved a constant comparison by participants between previous experiences and current experience.

Embodiment refers to the sense of “immersion”, “encompassment”, “engagement” and “in-the-moment” sensation, which for certain CTG participants at particular points in the tour further heightened the *quality* of their tourism experience.

Each of the five quality mediators, Tour leader, Locally hosted visits, Tour elements, Tour group, and Tour destination, are also now briefly considered. The mediators are presented in rank order.

The Tour Leader was the stand-out mediator of quality for CTG participants. This position was attributed to his going above and beyond, “customer focus”, “professionalism”, “differentiation”, personal characteristics and service recovery.

Locally hosted visits were classified using three lower-order concepts: CTG participants as visits adding quality; visits for the giving and taking; and visits adding little quality.

Tour elements included accommodation, activities and attractions, tour operations and pre-tour experiences. While the Tour Leader and the Locally hosted visits may be considered as elements of a tour, the CTG participants considered them as mediators in their own rights.

The Tour group was constructed from three lower-order concepts: the group as a whole, cliques, and the individual tour participants themselves.

Finally, the Tour destination was constituted of two lower order concepts, destinations around the world, and China in particular.

Figure 1.0 portrays the Quality filtering of mediators model, which represents how China tour group individuals applied *quality filters* of *pricality*, *functionality*, *aesthetics* and *familiarity* to benchmark the China tour mediating quality concepts: Tour leader, Locally hosted visits, Tour elements, Tour group, and Tour destination, with instances of embodiment, to evaluate a *quality tourism experience*.

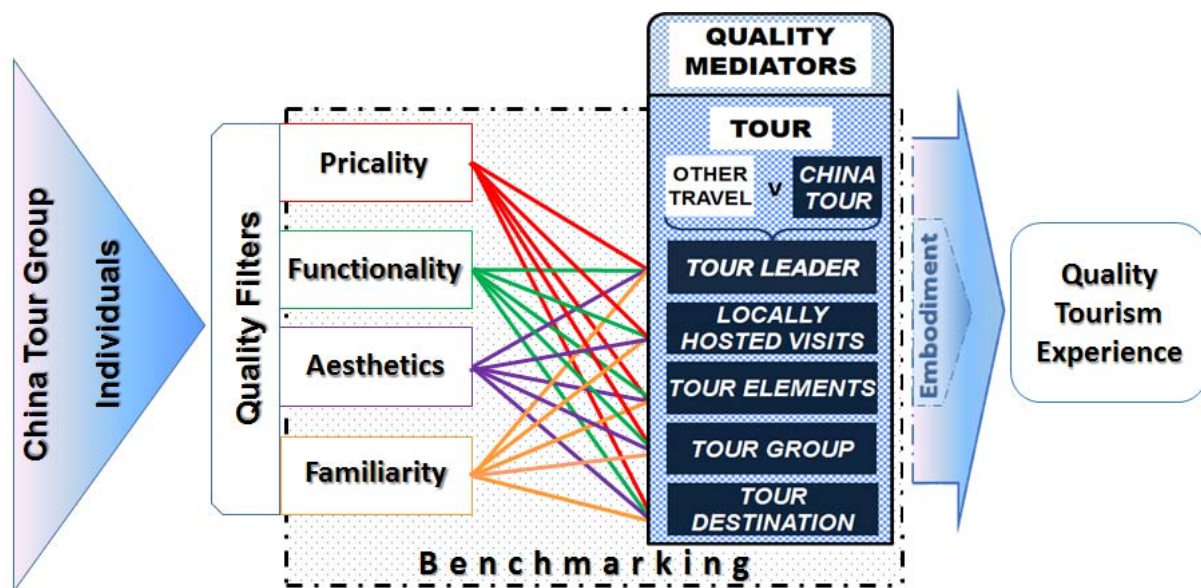


Figure 1.0. Quality filtering of mediators model

Conclusion and Recommendations

This extended abstract, which is drawn from a broader study, presents four contributions to the tourism literature. Firstly, a focus on a group tour, an under-researched area with regard to *quality tourism experiences*. Secondly, a new interpretation of *quality tourism experiences* through the coining of four quality filters, *pricality*, *functionality*, *aesthetics* and *familiarity* as well as the identification of five *quality mediators*, Tour leader, Locally hosted visits, Tour elements, Tour group, and Tour destination. Thirdly, generation of a quality filtering of mediators model. Fourthly, a furthering of the number of tourism and hospitality studies that are qualitative in nature that are used to achieve deep, rich understandings and

meanings of phenomena. Like all qualitative research, this study had its boundaries. The scope of the study was specific and purposive. To determine the goodness of fit and transferability of the Quality filtering of mediators model, other traveller types, modes of travel and different destinations should be studied using qualitative, quantitative and/or mixed methods approaches.

Providing quality tourism experiences to customers mutually supports sustainable tourism business practices (Arnould & Price, 1993, p. 236). Technological advancements and the rise of the internet have resulted in tourism suppliers offering 'sameness' (Knutson and Beck, 2004) with respect to their products and services. In today's experiential economy, tourists want more than to just "see" sights or overnight in a hotel. They want each travel component to deliver a quality experience (Morgan, Lugosi & Ritchie, 2010; Naumann, 1995). Subsequently, this research provides industry with a model to use in benchmarking the nature and degree of quality in tourism experiences that are offered by individual businesses. In particular, the Quality filtering of mediators model demonstrates key filters, mediators and processes associated with quality that serve to attract and retain tourists, a practise inextricably linked to sustaining business growth.

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Appendix A

Higher-order Concepts and associated Lower-order Concepts and (Re)interpretations

Tour Mediator	Higher-order Concept	Lower-order Concepts	(Re)interpreting	
1.0 The Tour Group	1.1 The group as a whole	1.1.1. Group dynamics	<u>Pricality</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value adding Good group Tour price Value for money Value diminishment 	<u>Functionality</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet new people Make new friends Group size Levels of fitness Flexibility Help & assistance Group norms/expectations Punctuality
		1.1.2. Challenges in the group		
	1.1.3. Operational opportunities			
		1.1.4. Getting along with others	<u>Aesthetics</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social interaction Sense of belonging, connectivity Friendliness/harmony/atmosphere Safety/assurance Fun/spark Pleasure Difference/tension Inflexibility/whinging 	<u>Familiarity</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Similar background Travelling interests Life stage Place of residence Lifestyle
		1.1.6. (Re)interpreting the group as a whole		
	1.2. Cliques within the group	1.2.1. (Re)interpreting cliques in the group	<u>Pricality</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Price Value added Value for money Personal gain Value diminishment 	<u>Functionality</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gravitation/sub-groups Family/relations Affiliations
<u>Aesthetics</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship/connectivity/friendship Circle of friends Welcoming Sharing Divided/united Rejection/marginalised Inclusive/exclusive Secrecy 			<u>Familiarity</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Previous tours Travel interests Shared experiences Bonds 	
	1.3. Individuals within the group	1.3.1. (Re)interpreting individuals within the group	<u>Pricality</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Price Value added Value for money Personal gain Value diminishment 	<u>Functionality</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health/physical disposition Attitude Confidence Travel skills
<u>Aesthetics</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refined/cultured Individualistic/collective Assistance/help Empathy Adventure Negativity/complaining 			<u>Familiarity</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self interest Selfishness/consideration Expected behaviour Past group travel experience Social norms Manners, politeness/rudeness 	